

A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge

by

George Berkeley (1685-1753)

WHEREIN THE CHIEF CAUSES OF ERROR AND DIFFICULTY IN THE
SCIENCES,
WITH THE GROUNDS OF SCEPTICISM, ATHEISM, AND IRRELIGION,
ARE INQUIRED INTO.

DEDICATION

To the Right Honourable
THOMAS, EARL OF PEMBROKE, &C.,
Knight of the most Noble Order of the Garter and one
of
the Lords of Her Majesty's most honourable privy
council.

My Lord,

You will perhaps wonder that an obscure person, who has
not the honour to
be known to your lordship, should presume to address you
in this manner.

But that a man who has written something with a design
to promote Useful

Knowledge and Religion in the world should make choice
of your lordship

for his patron, will not be thought strange by any one
that is not

altogether unacquainted with the present state of the
church and

learning, and consequently ignorant how great an
ornament and support you

are to both. Yet, nothing could have induced me to make
you this present
of my poor endeavours, were I not encouraged by that
candour and native
goodness which is so bright a part in your lordship's
character. I might
add, my lord, that the extraordinary favour and bounty
you have been
pleased to show towards our Society gave me hopes you
would not be
unwilling to countenance the studies of one of its
members. These
considerations determined me to lay this treatise at
your lordship's
feet, and the rather because I was ambitious to have it
known that I am
with the truest and most profound respect, on account of
that learning
and virtue which the world so justly admires in your
lordship, MY LORD,
Your lordship's most humble and most devoted servant,

GEORGE BERKELEY

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PREFACE

What I here make public has, after a long and scrupulous

inquiry, seemed
to me evidently true and not unuseful to be known--
particularly to those
who are tainted with Scepticism, or want a demonstration
of the existence
and immateriality of God, or the natural immortality of
the soul. Whether
it be so or no I am content the reader should
impartially examine; since
I do not think myself any farther concerned for the
success of what I
have written than as it is agreeable to truth. But, to
the end this may
not suffer, I make it my request that the reader suspend
his judgment
till he has once at least read the whole through with
that degree of
attention and thought which the subject-matter shall
seem to deserve.
For, as there are some passages that, taken by
themselves, are very
liable (nor could it be remedied) to gross
misinterpretation, and to be
charged with most absurd consequences, which,
nevertheless, upon an
entire perusal will appear not to follow from them; so
likewise, though
the whole should be read over, yet, if this be done
transiently, it is
very probable my sense may be mistaken; but to a
thinking reader, I
flatter myself it will be throughout clear and obvious.
As for the
characters of novelty and singularity which some of the
following notions
may seem to bear, it is, I hope, needless to make any
apology on that
account. He must surely be either very weak, or very
little acquainted
with the sciences, who shall reject a truth that is
capable of
demonstration, for no other reason but because it is
newly known, and
contrary to the prejudices of mankind. Thus much I
thought fit to

premise, in order to prevent, if possible, the hasty censures of a sort of men who are too apt to condemn an opinion before they rightly comprehend it.

INTRODUCTION

1. Philosophy being nothing else but THE STUDY OF WISDOM AND TRUTH, it may with reason be expected that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, a greater clearness and evidence of knowledge, and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. Yet so it is, we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing THAT IS FAMILIAR appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming SCEPTICS. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavouring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies,

which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn Scepticism.

2. The cause of this is thought to be the obscurity of things, or the natural weakness and imperfection of our understandings. It is said, the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the SUPPORT and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the INWARD ESSENCE and constitution of things. Besides, the mind of man being finite, when it treats of things which partake of infinity, it is not to be wondered at if it run into absurdities and contradictions, out of which it is impossible it should ever extricate itself, it being of the nature of infinite not to be comprehended by that which is finite.

3. But, perhaps, we may be too partial to ourselves in placing the fault originally in our faculties, and not rather in the wrong use we make of them. IT IS A HARD THING TO SUPPOSE THAT RIGHT DEDUCTIONS FROM TRUE PRINCIPLES SHOULD EVER END IN CONSEQUENCES WHICH CANNOT BE MAINTAINED or made consistent. We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge which he had placed quite out of their reach. This were not agreeable to the wonted indulgent methods of Providence, which, whatever appetites it may have implanted in the creatures, doth usually furnish them with such means as, if rightly made use of, will not fail to

satisfy them. Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves--that we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see.

4. My purpose therefore is, to try if I can discover what those Principles are which have introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions, into the several sects of philosophy; insomuch that the wisest men have thought our ignorance incurable, conceiving it to arise from the natural dulness and limitation of our faculties. And surely it is a work well deserving our pains to make a strict inquiry concerning the First Principles of Human Knowledge, to sift and examine them on all sides, especially since there may be some grounds to suspect that those lets and difficulties, which stay and embarrass the mind in its search after truth, do not spring from any darkness and intricacy in the objects, or natural defect in the understanding, so much as from false Principles which have been insisted on, and might have been avoided.

5. How difficult and discouraging soever this attempt may seem, when I consider how many great and extraordinary men have gone before me in the like designs, yet I am not without some hopes--upon the consideration that the largest views are not always the clearest, and that he who is short--sighted will be obliged to draw the object nearer, and may,

perhaps, by a close and narrow survey, discern that which had escaped far better eyes.

6. A CHIEF SOURCE OF ERROR IN ALL PARTS OF KNOWLEDGE.--

In order to prepare the mind of the reader for the easier conceiving what follows, it is proper to premise somewhat, by way of Introduction, concerning the nature and abuse of Language. But the unravelling this matter leads me in some measure to anticipate my design, by taking notice of what seems to have had a chief part in rendering speculation intricate and perplexed, and to have occasioned innumerable errors and difficulties in almost all parts of knowledge. And that is the opinion that the mind has a power of framing ABSTRACT IDEAS or notions of things. He who is not a perfect stranger to the writings and disputes of philosophers must needs acknowledge that no small part of them are spent about abstract ideas. These are in a more especial manner thought to be the object of those sciences which go by the name of LOGIC and METAPHYSICS, and of all that which passes under the notion of the most abstracted and sublime learning, in all which one shall scarce find any question handled in such a manner as does not suppose their existence in the mind, and that it is well acquainted with them.

7. PROPER ACCEPTATION OF ABSTRACTION.--It is agreed on all hands that the qualities or modes of things do never REALLY EXIST EACH OF THEM APART BY ITSELF, and separated from all others, but are mixed, as it were, and blended together, several in the same object. But, we

are told, the mind being able to consider each quality singly, or abstracted from those other qualities with which it is united, does by that means frame to itself abstract ideas. For example, there is perceived by sight an object extended, coloured, and moved: this mixed or compound idea the mind resolving into its simple, constituent parts, and viewing each by itself, exclusive of the rest, does frame the abstract ideas of extension, colour, and motion. Not that it is possible for colour or motion to exist without extension; but only that the mind can frame to itself by ABSTRACTION the idea of colour exclusive of extension, and of motion exclusive of both colour and extension.

8. OF GENERALIZING [Note].--Again, the mind having observed that in the particular extensions perceived by sense there is something COMMON and alike IN ALL, and some other things peculiar, as this or that figure or magnitude, which distinguish them one from another; it considers apart or singles out by itself that which is common, making thereof a most abstract idea of extension, which is neither line, surface, nor solid, nor has any figure or magnitude, but is an idea entirely prescinded from all these. So likewise the mind, by leaving out of the particular colours perceived by sense that which distinguishes them one from another, and retaining that only which is COMMON TO ALL, makes an idea of colour in abstract which is neither red, nor blue, nor white, nor any other determinate colour. And, in like manner, by considering motion abstractedly not only from the body

moved, but likewise from the figure it describes, and all particular directions and velocities, the abstract idea of motion is framed; which equally corresponds to all particular motions whatsoever that may be perceived by sense.

[Note: Vide Reid, on the Intellectual Powers of Man, Essay V, chap iii. sec. 1, edit. 1843]

9. OF COMPOUNDING.--And as the mind frames to itself abstract ideas of qualities or MODES, so does it, by the same precision or mental separation, attain abstract ideas of the more compounded BEINGS which include several coexistent qualities. For example, the mind having observed that Peter, James, and John resemble each other in certain common agreements of shape and other qualities, leaves out of the complex or compounded idea it has of Peter, James, and any other particular man, that which is peculiar to each, retaining only what is common to all, and so makes an abstract idea wherein all the particulars equally partake--abstracting entirely from and cutting off all those circumstances and differences which might determine it to any particular existence. And after this manner it is said we come by the abstract idea of MAN, or, if you please, humanity, or human nature; wherein it is true there is included colour, because there is no man but has some colour, but then it can be neither white, nor black, nor any particular colour, because there is no one particular colour wherein all men partake. So likewise there is

included stature,
but then it is neither tall stature, nor low stature,
nor yet middle
stature, but something abstracted from all these. And so
of the rest.
Moreover, their being a great variety of other creatures
that partake in
some parts, but not all, of the complex idea of MAN, the
mind, leaving
out those parts which are peculiar to men, and retaining
those only which
are common to all the living creatures, frames the idea
of ANIMAL, which
abstracts not only from all particular men, but also all
birds, beasts,
fishes, and insects. The constituent parts of the
abstract idea of animal
are body, life, sense, and spontaneous motion. By BODY
is meant body
without any particular shape or figure, there being no
one shape or
figure common to all animals, without covering, either
of hair, or
feathers, or scales, &c., nor yet naked: hair, feathers,
scales, and
nakedness being the distinguishing properties of
particular animals, and
for that reason left out of the ABSTRACT IDEA. Upon the
same account the
spontaneous motion must be neither walking, nor flying,
nor creeping; it
is nevertheless a motion, but what that motion is it is
not easy to
conceive[Note.].

[Note: Vide Hobbes' Tripos, ch. v. sect. 6.]

10. TWO OBJECTIONS TO THE EXISTENCE OF ABSTRACT IDEAS.--
Whether
others have this wonderful faculty of ABSTRACTING THEIR
IDEAS,
they best can tell: for myself, I find indeed I have a
faculty of
imagining, or representing to myself, the ideas of those
particular

things I have perceived, and of variously compounding and dividing them. I can imagine a man with two heads, or the upper parts of a man joined to the body of a horse. I can consider the hand, the eye, the nose, each by itself abstracted or separated from the rest of the body. But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and colour. Likewise the idea of man that I frame to myself must be either of a white, or a black, or a tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man. I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described. And it is equally impossible for me to form the abstract idea of motion distinct from the body moving, and which is neither swift nor slow, curvilinear nor rectilinear; and the like may be said of all other abstract general ideas whatsoever. To be plain, I own myself able to abstract IN ONE SENSE, as when I consider some particular parts or qualities separated from others, with which, though they are united in some object, yet it is possible they may really exist without them. But I deny that I can abstract from one another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated; or that I can frame a general notion, by abstracting from particulars in the manner aforesaid--which last are the two proper acceptations of ABSTRACTION. And there are grounds to think most men will acknowledge themselves to be in my case. The generality of men which are simple and illiterate never pretend to ABSTRACT NOTIONS. It is said they are difficult and not to be attained without pains

and study; we may therefore reasonably conclude that, if such there be, they are confined only to the learned.

11. I proceed to examine what can be alleged in DEFENCE OF THE DOCTRINE OF ABSTRACTION, and try if I can discover what it is that inclines the men of speculation to embrace an opinion so remote from common sense as that seems to be. There has been a late deservedly esteemed philosopher who, no doubt, has given it very much countenance, by seeming to think the having abstract general ideas is what puts the widest difference in point of understanding betwixt man and beast. "The having of general ideas," saith he, "is that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt man and brutes, and is an excellency which the faculties of brutes do by no means attain unto. For, it is evident we observe no foot-steps in them of making use of general signs for universal ideas; from which we have reason to imagine that they have not the FACULTY OF ABSTRACTING, or making general ideas, since they have no use of words or any other general signs." And a little after: "Therefore, I think, we may suppose that it is in this that the species of brutes are discriminated from men, and it is that proper difference wherein they are wholly separated, and which at last widens to so wide a distance. For, if they have any ideas at all, and are not bare machines (as some would have them), we cannot deny them to have some reason. It seems as evident to me that they do, some of them, in certain instances reason as that they have sense; but it

is only in particular ideas, just as they receive them from their senses. They are the best of them tied up within those narrow bounds, and have not (as I think) the faculty to enlarge them by any kind of ABSTRACTION." Essay on Human Understanding, II. xi. 10 and 11. I readily agree with this learned author, that the faculties of brutes can by no means attain to ABSTRACTION. But then if this be made the distinguishing property of that sort of animals, I fear a great many of those that pass for men must be reckoned into their number. The reason that is here assigned why we have no grounds to think brutes have abstract general ideas is, that we observe in them no use of words or any other general signs; which is built on this supposition--that the making use of words implies the having general ideas. From which it follows that men who use language are able to ABSTRACT or GENERALIZE their ideas. That this is the sense and arguing of the author will further appear by his answering the question he in another place puts: "Since all things that exist are only particulars, how come we by general terms?" His answer is: "Words become general by being made the signs of general ideas."-- Essay on Human Understanding, IV. iii. 6. But [Note. 1] it seems that a word becomes general by being made the sign, not of an ABSTRACT general idea, but of several particular ideas [Note. 2], any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind. For example, when it is said "the change of motion is proportional to the impressed force," or that "whatever has extension is divisible," these propositions are to be understood

of motion
and extension in general; and nevertheless it will not
follow that
they suggest to my thoughts an idea of motion without a
body moved,
or any determinate direction and velocity, or that I
must conceive
an abstract general idea of extension, which is neither
line, surface,
nor solid, neither great nor small, black, white, nor
red, nor of any
other determinate colour. It is only implied that
whatever particular
motion I consider, whether it be swift or slow,
perpendicular,
horizontal, or oblique, or in whatever object, the axiom
concerning
it holds equally true. As does the other of every
particular extension,
it matters not whether line, surface, or solid, whether
of this or
that magnitude or figure.

[Note 1: "TO THIS I CANNOT ASSENT, BEING OF OPINION,"
edit of 1710.]

[Note 2: Of the same sort.]

12. EXISTENCE OF GENERAL IDEAS ADMITTED.--By observing
how ideas
become general we may the better judge how words are
made so.
And here it is to be noted that I do not deny absolutely
there
are general ideas, but only that there are any ABSTRACT
GENERAL
IDEAS; for, in the passages we have quoted wherein there
is
mention of general ideas, it is always supposed that
they are formed by
ABSTRACTION, after the manner set forth in sections 8
and 9. Now, if we
will annex a meaning to our words, and speak only of
what we can
conceive, I believe we shall acknowledge that an idea

which, considered
in itself, is particular, becomes general by being made
to represent or
stand for all other particular ideas of the SAME SORT.
To make this plain
by an example, suppose a geometrician is demonstrating
the method of
cutting a line in two equal parts. He draws, for
instance, a black line
of an inch in length: this, which in itself is a
particular line, is
nevertheless with regard to its signification general,
since, as it is
there used, it represents all particular lines
whatsoever; so that what
is demonstrated of it is demonstrated of all lines, or,
in other words,
of a line in general. And, as that particular line
becomes general by
being made a sign, so the name LINE, which taken
absolutely is
PARTICULAR, by being a sign is made GENERAL. And as the
former owes its
generality not to its being the sign of an abstract or
general line, but
of ALL PARTICULAR right lines that may possibly exist,
so the latter must
be thought to derive its generality from the same cause,
namely, the
VARIOUS PARTICULAR lines which it indifferently denotes.
[Note.]

[Note: "I look upon this (doctrine) to be one of the
greatest and most
valuable discoveries that have been made of late years
in the republic
of letters."--Treatise of Human Nature, book i, part i,
sect. 7. Also
Stewart's Philosophy of the Mind, part i, chapt. iv.
sect. iii. p. 99.]

13. ABSTRACT GENERAL IDEAS NECESSARY, ACCORDING TO
LOCKE.--To give
the reader a yet clearer view of the nature of abstract
ideas,

and the uses they are thought necessary to, I shall add one more passage out of the Essay on Human Understanding, (IV. vii. 9) which is as follows: "ABSTRACT IDEAS are not so obvious or easy to children or the yet unexercised mind as particular ones. If they seem so to grown men it is only because by constant and familiar use they are made so. For, when we nicely reflect upon them, we shall find that general ideas are fictions and contrivances of the mind, that carry difficulty with them, and do not so easily offer themselves as we are apt to imagine. For example, does it not require some pains and skill to form the general idea of a triangle (which is yet none of the most abstract, comprehensive, and difficult); for it must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but ALL AND NONE of these at once? In effect, it is something imperfect that cannot exist, an idea wherein some parts of several different and INCONSISTENT ideas are put together. It is true the mind in this imperfect state has need of such ideas, and makes all the haste to them it can, for the CONVENIENCY OF COMMUNICATION AND ENLARGEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE, to both which it is naturally very much inclined. But yet one has reason to suspect such ideas are marks of our imperfection. At least this is enough to show that the most abstract and general ideas are not those that the mind is first and most easily acquainted with, nor such as its earliest knowledge is conversant about."--If any man has the faculty of framing in his mind such an idea of a triangle as is here described, it is

in vain to pretend
to dispute him out of it, nor would I go about it. All I
desire is that
the reader would fully and certainly inform himself
whether he has such
an idea or no. And this, methinks, can be no hard task
for anyone to
perform. What more easy than for anyone to look a little
into his own
thoughts, and there try whether he has, or can attain to
have, an idea
that shall correspond with the description that is here
given of the
general idea of a triangle, which is NEITHER OBLIQUE NOR
RECTANGLE,
EQUILATERAL, EQUICRURAL NOR SCALENON, BUT ALL AND NONE
OF THESE AT ONCE?

14. BUT THEY ARE NOT NECESSARY FOR COMMUNICATION.--Much
is here
said of the difficulty that abstract ideas carry with
them, and
the pains and skill requisite to the forming them. And
it is on
all hands agreed that there is need of great toil and
labour of the mind,
to emancipate our thoughts from particular objects, and
raise them to
those sublime speculations that are conversant about
abstract ideas. From
all which the natural consequence should seem to be,
that so DIFFICULT a
thing as the forming abstract ideas was not necessary
for COMMUNICATION,
which is so EASY and familiar to ALL SORTS OF MEN. But,
we are told, if
they seem obvious and easy to grown men, IT IS ONLY
BECAUSE BY CONSTANT
AND FAMILIAR USE THEY ARE MADE SO. Now, I would fain
know at what time it
is men are employed in surmounting that difficulty, and
furnishing
themselves with those necessary helps for discourse. It
cannot be when
they are grown up, for then it seems they are not

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