

Is Reality Really Real? Berkeley vs. Russell

Reading One: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous, by George Berkeley

George Berkeley (1685-1753), Bishop of Cloyne, was one of the great philosophers of the early modern period. He was a brilliant critic of his predecessors, particularly Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke. He was a talented metaphysician famous for defending idealism, that is, the view that reality consists exclusively of minds and their ideas.

In this dialogue, Philonous is trying to convince Hylas that “there is no such thing as material substance in the world.” Read the opening of the dialogue...

Hyl: In last night’s conversation you were represented as someone who maintains the most extravagant opinion that ever entered into the mind of man, namely that there is no such thing as material substance in the world.

Phil: I seriously believe that there is no such thing as what philosophers call ‘material substance’; but if I were made to see anything absurd or sceptical in this, then I would have the same reason to renounce this belief as I think I have now to reject the contrary opinion.

Hyl: What! can anything be more fantastical, more in conflict with common sense, or a more obvious piece of scepticism, than to believe there is no such thing as matter?

Phil: Steady on, Hylas! What if it were to turn out that you who hold that there is matter are—by virtue of that opinion—a greater sceptic, and maintain more paradoxes and conflicts with common sense, than I who believe no such thing?

Hyl: You have as good a chance of convincing me that the part is greater than the whole as of convincing me that I must give up my belief in matter if I am to avoid absurdity and scepticism.

In the next part, Philonous uses logical arguments to convince Hylas that perceptions and sensations are not reliable ways to know about matter. For example, he shows him that qualities such as heat, taste, and odor are subjective and exist only in the mind of the perceiver, rather than being actual qualities of real things. Next, Philonous will try to convince Hylas that matter too only exists in our minds...

Hyl: I think it was a big oversight on my part that I failed to distinguish sufficiently the object from the sensation. The sensation cannot exist outside the mind, but it doesn’t follow that the object cannot either.

Phil: What object do you mean? The object of the senses?

Hyl: Exactly.

Phil: So it is immediately perceived?

Hyl: Right.

Phil: Explain to me the difference between what is immediately perceived and a sensation.

Hyl: I take the sensation to be an act of the perceiving mind; beside which, there is something perceived, which I call the object of the act. For example, there is red and yellow on that tulip, but the act of perceiving those colours is in me only, and not in the tulip.

Phil: What tulip are you talking about? Is it the one that you see?

Hyl: The same.

Phil: And what do you see beside colour, shape, and extendedness?

Hyl: Nothing.

Phil: So you would say that the red and yellow are coexistent with the extension, wouldn't you?

Hyl: Yes, and I go further: I say that they have a real existence outside the mind in some unthinking substance.

Phil: That the colours are really in the tulip which I see, is obvious. Nor can it be denied that this tulip may exist independently of your mind or mine; but that any immediate object of the senses—that is, any idea or combination of ideas—should exist in an unthinking substance, or exterior to all minds, is in itself an obvious contradiction. Nor can I imagine how it follows from what you said just now, namely that the red and yellow are in the tulip you saw, since you don't claim to see that unthinking substance.

Hyl: You are skillful at changing the subject, Philonous.

Phil: I see that you don't want me to push on in that direction. So let's return to your distinction between sensation and object. If I understand you correctly, you hold that in every perception there are two things of which one is an action of the mind and the other is not.

Hyl: True.

Phil: And this action can't exist in or belong to any unthinking thing; but whatever else is involved in a perception may do so.

Hyl: That is my position.

Phil: So that if there were a perception without any act of the mind, that perception could exist in an unthinking substance.

Hyl: I grant that. But it is impossible that there should be such a perception.

Phil: When is the mind said to be active?

Hyl: When it produces, puts an end to, or changes anything.

Phil: Can the mind produce, discontinue, or change anything in any way except by an act of the will?

Hyl: It cannot.

Phil: So the mind is to count as being active in its perceptions to the extent that volition is included in them.

Hyl: It is.

Phil: When I pluck this flower I am active, because I do it by a hand-movement which arose from my volition; so likewise in holding it up to my nose. But is either of these smelling?

Hyl: No.

Phil: I also act when I draw air through my nose, because my breathing in that manner rather than otherwise is an effect of my volition. But this isn't smelling either; for if it were, I would smell every time I breathed in that manner.

Hyl: True.

Phil: Smelling, then, is a result of all this plucking, holding up, and breathing in.

Hyl: It is.

Phil: But I don't find that my will is involved any further—that is, in anything other than the plucking, holding up, and breathing in. Whatever else happens—including my perceiving a smell—is independent of my will, and I am wholly passive with respect to it. Is it different in your case, Hylas?

Hyl: No, it's just the same.

Phil: Now consider seeing: isn't it in your power to open your eyes or keep them shut, to turn them this way or that?

Hyl: Without doubt.

Phil: But does it similarly depend on your will that when you look at this flower you perceive white rather than some other colour? When you direct your open eyes towards that part of the sky, can you avoid seeing the sun? Or is light or darkness the effect of your volition?

Hyl: No, certainly.

Phil: In these respects, then, you are altogether passive.

Hyl: I am.

Phil: Tell me now, does seeing consist •in perceiving light and colours or rather in •opening and turning the eyes?

Hyl: The former, certainly.

Phil: Well, then, since in the actual perception of light and colours you are altogether passive, what has become of that action that you said was an ingredient in every sensation? And doesn't it follow from your own concessions that the perception of light and colours—which doesn't involve any action—can exist in an unperceiving substance? And isn't this a plain contradiction?

Hyl: I don't know what to think.

Phil: Furthermore, since you distinguish active and passive elements in every perception, you must do it in the perception of pain. But how could pain—however inactive it is—possibly exist in an unperceiving substance? Think about it, and then tell me frankly: aren't light and colours, tastes, sounds, etc. all equally passions or sensations in the mind? You may call them 'external objects', and give them in words whatever kind of existence you like; but examine your own thoughts and then tell me whether I am not right?

Hyl: I admit, Philonous, that when I look carefully at •what goes on in my mind, all I can find is that I am a thinking being that has a variety of sensations; and I can't conceive how a sensation could exist in an unperceiving substance. But when on the other hand I look in a different way at •sensible things, considering them as so many properties and qualities, I find that I have to suppose a material substratum, without which they can't be conceived to exist.

Phil: Material substratum you call it? Tell me, please, which of your senses acquainted you with it?

Hyl: It is not itself sensible; only its properties and qualities are perceived by the senses.

Phil: I presume, then, that you obtained the idea of it through reflection and reason.

Hyl: I don't claim to have any proper •positive idea of it. [Here 'positive' means 'non-relational': Hylas means that he doesn't have an idea that represents what material substance is like in itself.] But I conclude that it exists, because qualities can't be conceived to exist without a support.

OK, so now Hylas has been convinced that everything we perceive is only in our minds. However, Hylas argues that there is a "material substratum" of physical reality that causes the perceptions in our minds. Philonous will try to show Hylas that we have no proof that such an underlying physical reality exists, all we have are our perceptions and there is no way to know that they are linked to any actual reality.

Hyl: To tell you the truth, Philonous, I think there are two kinds of objects: one kind perceived immediately, and called 'ideas'; the other kind are real things or external objects perceived by the mediation of ideas, which resemble and represent them. Now I grant that ideas don't exist outside the mind; but the second sort of objects do. I am sorry I didn't think of this distinction sooner; it would probably have cut short your discourse.

Phil: Are those external objects perceived by •sense, or by •some other faculty?

Hyl: They are perceived by sense.

Phil: What? Is there anything perceived by sense that isn't immediately perceived?

Hyl: Yes, Philonous, there is—in a way. For example, when I look at a picture or statue of Julius Caesar, I may be said to perceive him in a fashion (though not immediately) by my senses.

Phil: You seem to hold, then, that our ideas, which are all that we immediately perceive, are pictures of external things; and that the latter are also perceived by sense because they have a conformity or resemblance to our ideas.

Hyl: That is my meaning.

Phil: And in the same way that Julius Caesar, in himself invisible, is nevertheless perceived by sight, so also real things, in themselves imperceptible, are perceived by sense.

Hyl: In the very same way.

Phil: Tell me, Hylas, when you look at the picture of Julius Caesar, do you see with your eyes anything more than some colours and shapes, with a certain symmetry and composition of the whole?

Hyl: Nothing else.

Phil: And wouldn't a man who had never known anything about Julius Caesar see as much?

Hyl: He would.

Phil: So he has his sight, and the use of it, as perfectly as you have yours.

Hyl: I agree with you.

Phil: Then why are your thoughts directed to the Roman emperor while his are not? This can't come from the sensations or ideas of sense that you perceive at that moment, for you have agreed that you have in that respect no advantage over the man who has never heard of Julius Caesar. So it seems that the direction of your thoughts comes from reason and memory—doesn't it?

Hyl: It does.

Phil: So that example of yours doesn't show that anything is perceived by sense that isn't immediately perceived. I don't deny that we can be said in a certain sense to perceive sensible things mediately by sense: that is when the immediate perception of ideas by one sense suggests to the mind others, perhaps belonging to another sense, of a kind that have often been perceived to go with ideas of the former kind. For instance, when I hear a coach drive along the streets, all that I immediately perceive is the sound; but from my past experience that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to 'hear the coach'. Still, it is obvious that in truth and strictness nothing can be heard but sound; and the coach in that example is not strictly perceived by sense but only suggested from experience. Similarly, when we are said to see a red-hot bar of iron; the solidity and heat of the iron are not the objects of sight, but are suggested to the imagination by the colour and shape that are strictly perceived by that sense. In short, the only things that are actually and strictly perceived by any sense are the ones that would have been perceived even if we had only just acquired that sense and were using it for the first time. As for other things, clearly they are only suggested to the mind by past experience. But to return to your comparison of imperceptible 'real things' with Caesar's picture: obviously, if you keep to this you'll have to hold that the real things that our ideas copy are perceived not by sense but by some internal faculty of the soul such as reason or memory. I would be interested to know what arguments reason gives you for the existence of your 'real things' or material objects; or whether you remember seeing them formerly not as copied by your ideas but as they are in themselves; or if you have heard or read of anyone else who did!

Hyl: I can see that you want to make fun of me, Philonous; but that will never convince me.

Phil: All I want is to learn from you how to come by knowledge of material things. Whatever we perceive is perceived either immediately by sense, or mediately by reason and reflection. But you have excluded sense; so please show me what reason you have to believe in their existence, or what means you can possibly adopt to prove, to my understanding or your own, that they exist.

Hyl: To be perfectly frank, Philonous, now that I think about it I can't find any good reason for my position. But it seems pretty clear that it's at least possible that such things really exist; and as long as there is no absurdity in supposing them, I shall continue in my belief until you bring good reasons to the contrary.

Phil: What? Has it come to this, that you believe in the existence of material objects, and that this belief is based on the mere possibility of its being true? Then you challenge me to bring reasons against it; though some people would think that the burden of proof lies with him who holds the affirmative position. Anyway, this very thesis that you are now determined to maintain without any reason is in effect one that you have—more than once during this conversation—seen good reason to give up. But let us set all that aside. If I understand you rightly, you say our ideas don't exist outside the mind, but that they are copies, likenesses, or representations of certain originals that do.

Hyl: You have me right.

Phil: Our ideas, then, are like external things.

Hyl: They are.

Phil: Do those external things have a stable and permanent nature independently of our senses; or do they keep changing as we move our bodies and do things with our faculties or organs of sense?

Hyl: Real things, obviously, have a fixed and real nature which remains the same through any changes in our senses or in how our bodies are placed or how they move. Such changes may indeed affect the ideas in our minds, but it would be absurd to think they had the same effect on things existing outside the mind.

Phil: How, then, can things that are perpetually fleeting and variable as our ideas are be copies or likenesses of any thing that is fixed and constant? Since all sensible qualities—size, shape, colour, etc.—that is, our ideas, are continually changing with every alteration in the distance, medium, or instruments of sensation, how can any fixed material object be properly represented or depicted by several distinct things or ideas, each of which is so unlike the others? Or if you say that the object resembles just one of our ideas, how can we distinguish that true copy from all the false ones?

Hyl: I have to admit, Philonous, that I am at a loss. I don't know what to say to this.

Phil: There is more. Are material objects in themselves perceptible or imperceptible?

Hyl: Properly and immediately nothing can be perceived but ideas. All material things, therefore, are in themselves insensible, and can be perceived only through ideas of them.

Phil: Ideas are sensible, then, and their originals—the things they are copies of—are insensible?

Hyl: Right.

Phil: But how can something that is sensible be like something that is insensible? Can a real thing, in itself invisible, be like a colour? Can a real thing that isn't audible be like a sound? In a word, can anything be like a sensation or idea but another sensation or idea?

Hyl: I must admit that I think not. Phil: Can there possibly be any doubt about this? Don't you perfectly know your own ideas?

Hyl: Yes, I know them perfectly; for something that I don't perceive or know can't be any part of my idea.

Phil: Well, then, examine your ideas, and then tell me if there's anything in them that could exist outside the mind, or if you can conceive anything like them existing outside the mind.

Hyl: Upon looking into it I find that I can't conceive or understand how anything but an idea can be like an idea. And it is most evident that no idea can exist outside the mind.

Phil: So you're forced by your own principles to deny the reality of sensible things, because you made it consist in an absolute existence outside the mind. That is to say, you are a downright sceptic. So I have met my target, which was to show that your principles lead to scepticism.

Hyl: For the present I am, if not entirely convinced, at least silenced.

Reading Two: The Problems of Philosophy, by Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Arthur William Russell (1872–1970) was a British philosopher, logician, essayist and social critic best known for his work in mathematical logic and analytic philosophy. Together with [G.E. Moore](#), Russell is generally recognized as one of the main founders of modern analytic philosophy. Together with [Kurt Gödel](#), he is regularly credited with being one of the most important logicians of the twentieth century.

In this essay, Russell examines Berkeley's views and takes another perspective. He argues that although we cannot prove that reality exists without our perceptions, it seems to me the most likely scenario that it does, and therefore we should accept it as true.

Read these excerpts from "The Problems of Philosophy" ([link on PSII website](#))
pp. 2-9 (and first line of 10)
(pp. 16-22)

After reading both of these philosophers, which point of view do you agree with?