

Reading Guide #3

George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp 7-87
George Berkeley, from *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (handout)

These questions are provided to assist you in your reading. I encourage you first to read the material through, then go back to answer the questions. You are not expected to hand in written answers. You are expected to have responses ready for class discussion. Boldfaced questions may appear on exams.

George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pp 7-87

Introduction

1. Are the paradoxes and difficulties of our understanding the fault of our senses? Explain.
2. Why does Berkeley want to make a strict inquiry concerning the first principles of human knowledge?
- 3. What “abuse of language” is a chief part of philosophical confusion?**
- 4. How do we, supposedly, arrive at abstract ideas?**
- 5. How does the perception of common qualities lead to a second layer of abstraction?**
- 6. How do we arrive at the abstract idea of man? Describe the specific qualities of this idea.**
- 7. “But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and color.” (§10)
Explain. Why is this an argument against abstract ideas?**
8. For Locke, what is the relationship between general words and abstract ideas? Does Berkeley think this establishes the existence of abstract ideas?
- 9. How does an idea become general? What is the purpose of these general terms?**
- 10. How does the notion of an abstract, general idea lead to a contradiction?**
11. Do we need abstract ideas for communication or the advancement of knowledge?
12. Do we need abstract ideas to account for geometric reasoning? Explain.
- 13. How does the presupposition that each word stands for one thing lead to the doctrine of abstract ideas? Be specific.**
14. For Berkeley, what do words signify?
15. How does Berkeley plan to avoid abusing language?

The Principles

16. What are the three types of ideas?
- 17. What is an object, like an apple, for Berkeley?**
- 18. What exists, besides ideas?**
- 19. How does Berkeley argue that the essence of unthinking things is their being perceived?**
- 20. What contradiction arises from the belief that sensible objects have an independent existence?**
- 21. How does the notion of the independent existence of material objects depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas?**
22. What kind of abstraction does Berkeley say we can perform? What can't we do, as regards abstraction?
23. Can an object which I don't perceive exist? Explain.
- 24. How does Berkeley argue that there can be no material substratum for our ideas?**
- 25. Why can't our ideas of objects resemble material substance? How does this show the primary/
secondary distinction to be unhelpful?**
26. “In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable.” (§10)
Explain. What does this show?
27. How does Berkeley argue that number does not exist without the mind?
- 28. Explain Berkeley's argument against the primary qualities from the relativity of perceptions, in §14
and §15. [Note: this argument is developed more detail in the excerpt from the *Three Dialogues*.]**
29. What limit does the above argument have?

30. What problem does Berkeley find in the argument that matter supports extension?
- 31. “Hence it is evident the supposition of external bodies is not necessary for producing our ideas...” (§18) Explain.**
32. Why can’t we conclude the existence of external bodies as an inference to the best explanation, as in §19?
- 33. “In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now.” (§20) Explain.**
34. Why doesn’t thinking of an unperceived object refute Berkeley?
35. How are ideas passive? How does Berkeley show this? What does this demonstrate? What, then, causes ideas and their changes?
36. Describe the differences among will, understanding, and spirit.
- 37. Explain the argument for the existence of a higher power in §29.**
- 38. What are laws of nature, according to Berkeley? Be specific. How do we learn them? Why are they useful?**
39. What’s the difference between a real thing and a chimera, an imaginary thing?
- 40. “If any man thinks this detracts from the existence or reality of things, he is very far from understanding what has been premised in the plainest terms I could think of.” (§36) Explain. Why doesn’t Berkeley say that ‘things’ exist?**
41. In what sense does Berkeley maintain the existence of substance?
42. Why doesn’t the appearance of distance show that things exist beyond ideas in the mind?
- 43. How does Berkeley respond to the objection that, on his theory, things go in and out of existence when we open and close our eyes? What would Locke say?**
44. How does Berkeley argue from infinite divisibility to the unreality of matter?
45. “And to say a die is hard, extended, and square, is not to attribute those qualities to a subject distinct from and supporting them, but only an explication of the meaning of the word *die*.” (§49) Explain.
46. Why doesn’t Berkeley agree that the success of natural science proves the existence of matter? What does natural science fail to explain? What does it prove?
47. “[W]e ought to think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar.” (§51) Explain.
- 48. “God might have done everything as well without them...” (§53) Explain.**
49. Specifically, how does Berkeley respond to the objection that matter must exist because most people think it does?
- 50. How does Berkeley account for the widespread belief in matter?**
51. How can Berkeley accept the predictions yielded by science, if he rejects matter?
52. Explain the eleventh objection, from organization and mechanism. Explain Berkeley’s three responses.
- 53. Why does Berkeley think that fire doesn’t cause pain? What does cause the pain?**
54. Describe Berkeley’s objection, in §§67-69, to the idea of matter as an inert, senseless substance which is the occasion of our ideas.
55. Can matter be that which makes (occasions) God to create ideas in us? Explain.
- 56. Explain the progression, in §73, which leads from positing matter to abandoning belief in matter.**
57. Can we at least keep the name ‘matter’? Explain.
58. Could a new sense support the existence of matter? Explain.
- 59. “[F]or anyone to pretend to a notion of entity or existence, abstracted from spirit and idea, from perceiving and being perceived, is, I suspect, a downright repugnancy and trifling with words.” (§81) Explain.**
60. Do the scriptures support materialism?
61. Does Berkeley’s idealism undermine the importance of miracles? Explain.
- 62. How does materialism lead to skepticism?**
- 63. How does idealism avoid skepticism?**
- 64. In what sense are the things perceived by sense external?**
65. How does materialism lead to atheism?
- 66. What are the two layers of abstraction, §99, which lead to materialism?**
67. How does the doctrine of abstract ideas seem to make morality difficult?

68. How do natural scientists use attraction (e.g. gravity or magnetism) as an explanation? What's wrong with this?
 69. What conclusions does Berkeley draw from his philosophy for natural science, in §§107-109?
 70. How does Berkeley disagree with Newton regarding space and motion?
 71. According to Berkeley, are there numbers? Explain.
 - 72. How is arithmetic infected by the doctrine of abstract ideas?**
 73. How does Berkeley attempt to show that matter is not infinitely divisible? What does this mean for geometry?
 - 74. "There is no such thing as the ten-thousandth part of an *inch*; but there is of a *mile* or *diameter of the earth*, which may be signified by that *inch*." (§127) Explain. How does this indicate the basic error of the notion of infinite divisibility, for Berkeley?**
 75. What 'paradox' arises from the notion of infinite divisibility?
 - 76. For Berkeley, can we have ideas of our selves (our spirits)? Explain. How can we know of our selves?**
 77. How does Berkeley argue for the immortality of the soul?
 78. How does the doctrine of abstract ideas mislead us in spiritual matters?
 - 79. How do we know about the existence of other spirits (people)? How is it different from our knowledge of ideas?**
 - 80. How does Berkeley believe we know God?**
 - 81. What does uniformity in nature show? What do blemishes in nature show?**
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- 82. How does Philonous plan to argue against the primary qualities?**
- 83. How does the example of the mite show the relativity of extension?**
- 84. What happens as we approach or recede from an object? What does this show, for Philonous?**
- 85. How does a microscope serve to show that the appearance of figure can change?**
- 86. What is the relation between motion and time? How is time measured? What does this mean for motion?**
- 87. How does Philonous argue for the relativity of solidity?**
88. Why does Philonous suppose that it is harder to believe that the primary qualities lack real existence?