Selections from

*Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*¹

by George Berkeley

The First Dialogue

PHILONOUS: Good morrow, Hylas. I did not expect to find you abroad so early.

HYLAS: It is indeed something unusual. But my thoughts were so taken up with a subject I was discoursing of last night that, finding I could not sleep, I resolved to rise and take a turn in the garden.... You were represented in last night's conversation as one who maintained the most extravagant opinion that ever entered into the mind of man, to wit, that there is no such thing as material substance in the world.

PHILONOUS: That there is no such thing as what philosophers call material substance, I am seriously persuaded. But, if I were made to see anything absurd or skeptical in this, I should then have the same reason to renounce this, that I imagine I have now to reject the contrary opinion.

HYLAS: What! Can anything be more fantastical, more repugnant to common sense, or a more manifest piece of skepticism, than to believe there is no such thing as matter?

¹ This material is in the public domain.
PHILONOUS: Softly, good Hylas. What if it should prove that you, who hold there is, are by virtue of that opinion a greater skeptic, and maintain more paradoxes and repugnances to common sense, than I who believe no such thing?

HYLAS: You may as soon persuade me, the part is greater than the whole, as that, in order to avoid absurdity and skepticism, I should ever be obliged to give up my opinion in this point....

PHILONOUS: What mean you by sensible things?

HYLAS: Those things which are perceived by the senses. Can you imagine that I mean anything else?

PHILONOUS: Pardon me, Hylas, if I am desirous clearly to apprehend your notions, since this may much shorten our inquiry. Suffer me then to ask you this farther question. Are those things only perceived by the senses which are perceived immediately? Or may those things properly be said to be sensible which are perceived mediately, or not without the intervention of others?

HYLAS: I do not sufficiently understand you.

PHILONOUS: In reading a book, what I immediately perceive are the letters; but mediately, or by means of these, are suggested to my mind the notions of God, virtue, truth, and so on. Now, that the letters are truly sensible things, or perceived by sense, there is no doubt. But I would know whether you take the things suggested by them to be so too.

HYLAS: No, certainly: It were absurd to think God or virtue sensible things, though they may be signified and suggested to the mind by sensible marks, with which they have an arbitrary connection.

PHILONOUS: It seems then, that by sensible things you mean those only which can be perceived immediately by sense?

HYLAS: Right.

PHILONOUS: Does it not follow from this, that though I see one part of the sky red, and another blue, and that my reason does thence evidently conclude there must be some cause of that diversity of colors, yet that cause cannot be said to be a sensible thing, or perceived by the sense of seeing?

HYLAS: It does.

PHILONOUS: In like manner, though I hear variety of sounds, yet I cannot be said to hear the causes of those sounds?

HYLAS: You cannot.

PHILONOUS: And when by my touch I perceive a thing to be hot and heavy, I cannot say, with any truth or propriety, that I feel the cause of
its heat or weight?

HYLAS: To prevent any more questions of this kind, I tell you once for all, that by sensible things I mean those only which are perceived by sense; and that in truth the senses perceive nothing which they do not perceive immediately, for they make no inferences. The deducing therefore of causes or occasions from effects and appearances, which alone are perceived by sense, entirely relates to reason.

PHILONOUS: This point then is agreed between us — that sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense. You will farther inform me whether we immediately perceive by sight anything beside light and colors and figures; or by hearing, anything but sounds; by the palate, anything beside tastes; by the smell, beside odors; or by the touch, more than tangible qualities.

HYLAS: We do not.

PHILONOUS: It seems, therefore, that if you take away all sensible qualities, there remains nothing sensible?

HYLAS: I grant it.

PHILONOUS: Sensible things therefore are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combinations of sensible qualities?

HYLAS: Nothing else.

PHILONOUS: Heat then is a sensible thing?

HYLAS: Certainly.

PHILONOUS: Does the reality of sensible things consist in being perceived? Or is it something distinct from their being perceived, and that bears no relation to the mind?

HYLAS: To exist is one thing, and to be perceived is another.

PHILONOUS: I speak with regard to sensible things only. And of these I ask whether by their real existence you mean a subsistence exterior to the mind and distinct from their being perceived?

HYLAS: I mean a real absolute being, distinct from, and without any relation to, their being perceived.

PHILONOUS: Heat therefore, if it be allowed a real being, must exist without the mind?

HYLAS: It Must.

PHILONOUS: Tell me, Hylas, is this real existence equally compatible to all degrees of heat which we perceive, or is there any reason why we should attribute it to some and deny it to others? And if there be, pray let me know that reason.

HYLAS: Whatever degree of heat we perceive by sense, we may be sure the same exists in the object that occasions it.
PHILONOUS: What! The greatest as well as the least?

HYLAS: I tell you, the reason is plainly the same in respect of both. They are both perceived by sense; nay, the greater degree of heat is more sensibly perceived; and consequently, if there is any difference, we are more certain of its real existence than we can be of the reality of a lesser degree.

PHILONOUS: But is not the most vehement and intense degree of heat a very great pain?

HYLAS: No one can deny it.

PHILONOUS: And is any unperceiving thing capable of pain or pleasure?

HYLAS: No, certainly.

PHILONOUS: Is your material substance a senseless being, or a being endowed with sense and perception?

HYLAS: It is senseless without doubt.

PHILONOUS: It cannot therefore be the subject of pain?

HYLAS: By no means.

PHILONOUS: Nor consequently of the greatest heat perceived by sense, since you acknowledge this to be no small pain?

HYLAS: I grant it.

PHILONOUS: What shall we say then of your external object – is it a material substance, or no?

HYLAS: It is a material substance with the sensible qualities inhering in it.

PHILONOUS: How then can a great heat exist in it, since you own it cannot [exist] in a material substance? I desire you would clear this point.

HYLAS: Hold, Philonous, I fear I was [mistaken] in yielding intense heat to be a pain. It should seem rather, that pain is something distinct from heat, and the consequence or effect of it.

PHILONOUS: Upon putting your hand near the fire, do you perceive one simple uniform sensation, or two distinct sensations?

HYLAS: But one simple sensation.

PHILONOUS S: Is not the heat immediately perceived?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: And the pain?

HYLAS: True.

PHILONOUS: Seeing therefore they are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and, consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain.

HYLAS: It seems so.
PHILONOUS: Again, try in your thoughts, Hylas, if you can conceive a vehement sensation to be without pain or pleasure.

HYLAS: I cannot.

PHILONOUS: Or can you frame to yourself an idea of sensible pain or pleasure in general, abstracted from every particular idea of heat, cold, tastes, smells, and so on?

HYLAS: I do not find that I can.

PHILONOUS: Does it not therefore follow that sensible pain is nothing distinct from those sensations or ideas, in an intense degree?

HYLAS: It is undeniable. And to speak the truth, I begin to suspect a very great heat cannot exist but in a mind perceiving it.

PHILONOUS: What! Are you then in that skeptical state of suspense, between affirming and denying?

HYLAS: I think I may be positive in the point. A very violent and painful heat cannot exist without the mind.

PHILONOUS: It has not therefore, according to you, any real being?

HYLAS: I own it.

PHILONOUS: Is it therefore certain that there is no body in nature really hot?

HYLAS: I have not denied there is any real heat in bodies. I only say there is no such thing as an intense real heat.

PHILONOUS: But did you not say before that all degrees of heat were equally real; or, if there was any difference, that the greater were more undoubtedly real than the lesser?

HYLAS: True, but it was because I did not then consider the ground there is for distinguishing between them, which I now plainly see. And it is this: Because intense heat is nothing else but a particular kind of painful sensation, and pain cannot exist but in a perceiving being, it follows that no intense heat can really exist in an unperceiving corporeal substance. But this is no reason why we should deny heat in an inferior degree to exist in such a substance.

PHILONOUS: But how shall we be able to discern those degrees of heat which exist only in the mind from those which exist without it?

HYLAS: That is no difficult matter. You know the least pain cannot exist unperceived; whatever, therefore, degree of heat is a pain exists only in the mind. But as for all other degrees of heat, nothing obliges us to think the same of them.

PHILONOUS: I think you granted before that no unperceiving being was capable of pleasure, any more than of pain.

HYLAS: I did.

PHILONOUS: And is not warmth, or a more gentle degree of heat than what causes uneasiness, a pleasure?
HYLAS: What then?
PHILONOUS: Consequently, it cannot exist without the mind in an unperceiving substance, or body.
HYLAS: So it seems.
PHILONOUS: Since, therefore, as well those degrees of heat that are not painful, as those that are, can exist only in a thinking substance, may we not conclude that external bodies are absolutely incapable of any degree of heat whatsoever?
HYLAS: On second thoughts, I do not think it so evident that warmth is a pleasure as that a great degree of heat is a pain.
PHILONOUS: I do not pretend that warmth is as great a pleasure as heat is a pain. But, if you grant it to be even a small pleasure, it serves to make good my conclusion.
HYLAS: I could rather call it an *indolence*. It seems to be nothing more than a privation of both pain and pleasure. And that such a quality or state as this may agree to an unthinking substance, I hope you will not deny.
PHILONOUS: If you are resolved to maintain that warmth, or a gentle degree of heat, is no pleasure, I know not how to convince you otherwise than by appealing to your own sense. But what think you of cold?
HYLAS: The same that I do of heat. An intense degree of cold is a pain; for to feel a very great cold, is to perceive a great uneasiness. It cannot therefore exist without the mind, but a lesser degree of cold may, as well as a lesser, degree of heat.
PHILONOUS: Those bodies, therefore, upon whose application to our own, we perceive a moderate degree of heat, must be concluded to have a moderate degree of heat or warmth in them; and those, upon whose application we feel a like degree of cold, must be thought to have cold in them.
HYLAS: They must.
PHILONOUS: Can any doctrine be true that necessarily leads a man into an absurdity?
HYLAS: Without doubt it cannot.
PHILONOUS: Is it not an absurdity to think that the same thing should be at the same time both cold and warm?
HYLAS: It is.
PHILONOUS: Suppose now one of your hands hot, and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state. Will not the water seem cold to one hand, and warm to the other?
HYLAS: It will.
PHILONOUS: Ought we not therefore, by your principles, to conclude it is really both cold and warm at the same time – that is, according to your own
concession, to believe an absurdity?

HYLAS: I confess it seems so.

PHILONOUS: Consequently, the principles themselves are false, since you have granted that no true principle leads to an absurdity.

HYLAS: But after all, can anything be more absurd than to say there is no heat in the fire?

PHILONOUS: To make the point still clearer, tell me whether, in two cases exactly alike, we ought not to make the same judgment?

HYLAS: We Ought.

PHILONOUS: When a pin pricks your finger, does it not rend and divide the fibers of your flesh?

HYLAS: It does.

PHILONOUS: And when a coal burns your finger, does it any more?

HYLAS: It does not.

PHILONOUS: Since, therefore, you neither judge the sensation itself occasioned by the pin, nor anything like it to be in the pin; you should not, conformably to what you have now granted, judge the sensation occasioned by the fire, or anything like it, to be in the fire.

HYLAS: Well, since it must be so, I am content to yield this point and acknowledge that heat and cold are only sensations existing in our minds. But there still remain qualities enough to secure the reality of external things.

PHILONOUS: But what will you say, Hylas, if it shall appear that the case is the same with regard to all other sensible qualities, and that they can no more be supposed to exist without the mind, than heat and cold?

HYLAS: Then indeed you will have done something to the purpose, but that is what I despair of seeing proved.

PHILONOUS: Let us examine them in order. What think you of tastes – do they exist without the mind, or no?

HYLAS: Can any man in his senses doubt whether sugar is sweet, or wormwood bitter?

PHILONOUS: Inform me, Hylas. Is a sweet taste a particular kind of pleasure or pleasant sensation, or is it not?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: And is not bitterness some kind of uneasiness or pain?

HYLAS: I grant it.

PHILONOUS: If therefore sugar and wormwood are unthinking corporeal substances existing without the mind, how can sweetness and bitterness, that is, pleasure and pain, agree to them?

HYLAS: Hold, Philonous, I now see what it was [that] deluded me all this time. You asked whether heat and cold, sweetness and bitterness, were not
particular sorts of pleasure and pain; to which I answered simply, that they were. Whereas I should have thus distinguished: Those qualities, as perceived by us, are pleasures or pains; but not as existing in the external objects. We must not therefore conclude absolutely that there is no heat in the fire or sweetness in the sugar, but only that heat or sweetness, as perceived by us, are not in the fire or sugar. What say you to this?

PHILONOUS: I say it is nothing to the purpose. Our discourse proceeded altogether concerning sensible things, which you defined to be the things we immediately perceive by our senses. Whatever other qualities, therefore, you speak of, as distinct from these, I know nothing of them, neither do they at all belong to the point in dispute. You may, indeed, pretend to have discovered certain qualities which you do not perceive, and assert those insensible qualities exist in fire and sugar. But what use can be made of this to your present purpose, I am at a loss to conceive. Tell me then once more, do you acknowledge that heat and cold, sweetness and bitterness (meaning those qualities which are perceived by the senses), do not exist without the mind?

HYLAS: I see it is to no purpose to hold out, so I give up the cause as to those mentioned qualities. Though I profess it sounds oddly to say that sugar is not sweet.

PHILONOUS: But, for your farther satisfaction, take this along with you: That which at other times seems sweet, shall, to a distempered palate, appear bitter. And nothing can be plainer than that divers' persons perceive different tastes in the same food, since that which one man delights in, another abhors. And how could this be, if the taste was something really inherent in the food?

HYLAS: I acknowledge I know not how....

PHILONOUS: And I hope you will make no difficulty to acknowledge the same of colors.

HYLAS: Pardon me; the case of colors is very different. Can anything be plainer than that we see them on the objects?

PHILONOUS: The objects you speak of are, I suppose, corporeal substances existing without the mind?

HYLAS: They are.

PHILONOUS: And have true and real colors inhering in them?

HYLAS: Each visible object has that color which we see in it....

PHILONOUS: What! Are then the beautiful red and purple we see on yonder clouds really in them? Or do you imagine they have in themselves any other form than that of a dark mist or vapor?

HYLAS: I must own, Philonous, those colors are not really in the clouds as they seem to be at this distance. They are only apparent colors.

PHILONOUS: Apparent call you them? How shall we distinguish these
apparent colors from real?
HYLAS: Very easily. Those are to be thought apparent which, appearing
only at a distance, vanish upon a nearer approach.
PHILONOUS: And those, I suppose, are to be thought real which are
discovered by the most near and exact survey.
HYLAS: Right.
PHILONOUS: Is the nearest and exactest survey made by the help of a mi-
icroscope, or by the naked eye?
HYLAS: By a microscope, doubtless.
PHILONOUS: But a microscope often discovers colors in an object different
from those perceived by the unassisted sight. And in case we had mi-
crosopes magnifying to any assigned degree, it is certain that no object
whatsoever, viewed through them, would appear in the same color
which it exhibits to the naked eye.
HYLAS: And what will you conclude from all this? You cannot argue that
there are really and naturally no colors on objects, because by artificial
managements they may be altered or made to vanish.
PHILONOUS: I think it may evidently be concluded from your own
concessions, that all the colors we see with our naked eyes are only
apparent as those on the clouds, since they vanish upon a more close
and accurate inspection, which is afforded us by a microscope. Then, as
to what you say by way of prevention: I ask you whether the real and
natural state of an object is better discovered by a very sharp and piercing
sight, or by one which is less sharp?
HYLAS: By the former without doubt.
PHILONOUS: Is it not plain from [optics] that microscopes make the sight
more penetrating and represent objects as they would appear to the eye in
case it were naturally endowed with a most exquisite sharpness?
HYLAS: It is.
PHILONOUS: Consequently the microscopical representation is to be
thought that which best sets forth the real nature of the thing, or what it is
in itself. The colors, therefore, by it perceived are more genuine and
real than those perceived otherwise.
HYLAS: I confess there is something in what you say... .
PHILONOUS:... I would fain know farther from you, what certain distance
and position of the object, what peculiar texture and formation of the
eye, what degree or kind of light is necessary for ascertaining that
true color, and distinguishing it from apparent ones.
HYLAS: I own myself entirely satisfied that they are all equally apparent and
that there is no such thing as color really inhering in external bodies, but that
it is altogether in the light. And what confirms me in this opinion is that in proportion to the light colors are still more or less vivid; and if there be no light, then are there no colors perceived. Besides, allowing there are colors on external objects, yet, how is it possible for us to perceive them? For no external body affects the mind unless it acts first on our organs of sense. But the only action of bodies is motion, and motion cannot be communicated otherwise than by impulse. A distant object therefore cannot act on the eye, nor consequently make itself or its properties perceivable to the soul. Whence it plainly follows that it is immediately some contiguous substance which, operating on the eye, occasions a perception of colors – and such is light.

PHILONOUS: How! Is light then a substance?

HYLAS: I tell you, Philonous, external light is nothing but a thin fluid substance whose minute particles being agitated with a brisk motion, and in various manners reflected from the different surfaces of outward objects to the eyes, communicate different motions to the optic nerves; which, being propagated to the brain, cause therein various impressions; and these are attended with the sensations of red, blue, yellow, and so on.

PHILONOUS: It seems then the light does no more than shake the optic nerves.

HYLAS: Nothing else.

PHILONOUS: And consequent to each particular motion of the nerves, the mind is affected with a sensation which is some particular color.

HYLAS: Right.

PHILONOUS: And these sensations have no existence without the mind.

HYLAS: They have not.

PHILONOUS: How then do you affirm that colors are in the light, since by light you understand a corporeal substance external to the mind?

HYLAS: Light and colors, as immediately perceived by us, I grant cannot exist without the mind. But in themselves they are only the motions and configurations of certain insensible particles of matter.

PHILONOUS: Colors then, in the vulgar sense, or taken for the immediate objects of sight, cannot agree to any but a perceiving substance.

HYLAS: That is what I say.

PHILONOUS: Well then, since you give up the point as to those sensible qualities which are alone thought colors by all mankind beside, you may hold what you please with regard to those invisible ones of the philosophers....

HYLAS: I frankly own, Philonous, that it is in vain to stand out any longer. Colors, sounds, tastes, in a word all those termed secondary qualities, have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgment I must not be supposed to derogate anything from the reality of matter or external objects, seeing it is no more than several philosophers maintain, who
nevertheless are the farthest imaginable from denying matter. For the clearer understanding of this, you must know sensible qualities are by philosophers divided into primary and secondary. The former are extension, figure, solidity, gravity, motion, and rest; and these they hold exist really in bodies. The latter are those above enumerated – or, briefly, all sensible qualities beside the primary – which they assert are only so many sensations or ideas existing nowhere but in the mind. But all this, I doubt not, you are apprised of. For my part, I have been a long time sensible there was such in opinion current among philosophers, but was never thoroughly convinced of its truth until now.

PHILONOUS: You are still then of opinion that extension and figures are inherent in external unthinking substances?

HYLAS: I am.

PHILONOUS: But what if the same arguments which are brought against secondary qualities will hold good against these also?

HYLAS: Why then I shall be obliged to think, they too exist only in the mind.

PHILONOUS: Is it your opinion [that] very figure and extension which you perceive by sense exist in the outward object or material substance?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: Have all other animals as good grounds to think the same of the figure and extension which they see and feel?

HYLAS: Without doubt, if they have any thought at all.

PHILONOUS: Answer me, Hylas. Think you the senses were bestowed upon all animals for their preservation and well-being in life, or were they given to men alone for this end?

HYLAS: I make no question but they have the same use in all other animals.

PHILONOUS: If so, is it not necessary they should be enabled by them to perceive their own limbs and those bodies which are capable of harming them?

HYLAS: Certainly.

PHILONOUS: A mite therefore must be supposed to see his own foot, and things equal or even less than it, as bodies of some considerable dimension; though at the same time they appear to you scarce discernible, or at best as so many visible points?

HYLAS: I cannot deny it.

PHILONOUS: And to creatures less than the mite they will seem yet larger?

HYLAS: They will.

PHILONOUS: Insomuch that what you can hardly discern will to another extremely minute animal appear as some huge mountain?

HYLAS: All this I grant.
PHILONOUS: Can one and the same thing be at the same time in itself of different dimensions?
HYLAS: That were absurd to imagine.
PHILONOUS: But from what you have laid down it follows that both the extension by you perceived, and that perceived by the mite itself, as likewise all those perceived by lesser animals, are each of them the true extension of the mite’s foot; that is to say, by your own principles you are led into an absurdity.
HYLAS: There seems to be some difficulty in the point.
PHILONOUS: Again, have you not acknowledged that no real inherent property of any object can be changed without some change in the thing itself?
HYLAS: I have.
PHILONOUS: But as we approach to or recede from an object, the visible extension varies, being at one distance ten or a hundred times greater than at another. Does it not therefore follow from hence likewise that it is not really inherent in the object?
HYLAS: I own I am at a loss what to think.
PHILONOUS: Your judgment will soon be determined, if you will venture to think as freely concerning this quality as you have done concerning the rest. Was it not admitted as a good argument, that neither heat nor cold was in the water, because it seemed warm to one hand and cold to the other?
HYLAS: It was.
PHILONOUS: Is it not the very same reasoning to conclude, there is no extension or figure in an object, because to one eye it shall seem little, smooth, and round, when at the same time it appears to the other, great, uneven, and angular?
HYLAS: The very same. But does this latter fact ever happen?
PHILONOUS: You may at any time make the experiment, by looking with one eye bare, and with the other through a microscope.
HYLAS: I know not how to maintain it, and yet I am loath to give up extension, – I see so many odd consequences following upon such a concession.
PHILONOUS: Odd, say you? After the concessions already made, I hope you will stick at nothing for its oddness....
HYLAS: I acknowledge, Philonous, that, upon a fair observation of what passes in my mind, I can discover nothing else but that I am a thinking being, affected with variety of sensations; neither is it possible to conceive how a sensation should exist in an unperceiving substance. But then, on the other hand, when I look on sensible things in a different view, considering them as so many modes and qualities, I find it necessary to suppose a material substratum, without which they cannot be conceived to exist.
PHILONOUS: *Material substratum* call you it? Pray, by which of your senses came you acquainted with that being?

HYLAS: It is not itself sensible, its modes and qualities only being perceived by the senses.

PHILONOUS: I presume then it was by reflection and reason you obtained the idea of it?

HYLAS: I do not pretend to any proper positive idea of it. However, I conclude it exists, because qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support.

PHILONOUS: It seems then you have only a relative notion of it, or that you conceive it not otherwise than by conceiving the relation it bears to sensible qualities?

HYLAS: Right.

PHILONOUS: Be pleased therefore to let me know wherein that relation consists.

HYLAS: Is it not sufficiently expressed in the term *substratum, or substance*?

PHILONOUS: If so, the word *substratum* should import that it is spread under the sensible qualities or accidents?

HYLAS: True.

PHILONOUS: And consequently under extension?

HYLAS: I own it.

PHILONOUS: It is therefore somewhat in its own nature entirely distinct from extension?

HYLAS: I tell you, extension is only a mode, and matter is something that supports modes. And is it not evident the thing supported is different from the thing supporting?

PHILONOUS: So that something distinct from, and exclusive of, extension is supposed to be the substratum of extension?

HYLAS: Just so.

PHILONOUS: Answer me, Hylas. Can a thing be spread without extension? Or is not the idea of extension necessarily included in spreading?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: Whatsoever therefore you suppose spread under anything must have in itself an extension distinct from the extension of that thing under which it is spread?

HYLAS: It must.

PHILONOUS: Consequently, every corporeal substance, being the substratum of extension, must have in itself another extension, by which it is qualified to be a substratum – and so on to infinity? And I ask whether this be not absurd in itself, and repugnant to what you granted just now, to wit, that the substratum was something distinct from and exclusive of extension?
HYLAS: Aye but, Philonous, you take me wrong. I do not mean that matter is spread in a gross literal sense under extension. The word *substratum* is used only to express in general the same thing with *substance*.

PHILONOUS: Well then, let us examine the relation implied in the term *substance*. Is it not that it stands under accidents?

HYLAS: The very same.

PHILONOUS: But, that one thing may stand under or support another, must it not be extended?

HYLAS: It Must.

PHILONOUS: Is not therefore this supposition liable to the same absurdity with the former?

HYLAS: You still take things in a strict literal sense. That is not fair, Philonous.

PHILONOUS: I am not for imposing any sense on your words; you are at liberty to explain them as you please. Only, I beseech you, make me understand something by them. You tell me matter supports or stands under accidents. How? Is it as your legs support your body?

HYLAS: No; that is the literal sense.

PHILONOUS: Pray let me know any sense, literal or not literal, that you understand it in. How long must I wait for an answer, Hylas?

HYLAS: I declare I know not what to say. I once thought I understood well enough what was meant by matter’s supporting accidents. But now, the more I think on it the less can I comprehend it. In short, I find that I know nothing of it.

PHILONOUS: It seems then you have no idea at all, neither relative nor positive, of matter. You know neither what it is in itself, nor what relation it hears to accidents?

HYLAS: I acknowledge it.

PHILONOUS: And yet you asserted that you could not conceive how qualities or accidents should really exist, without conceiving at the same time a material support of them?

HYLAS: I did.

PHILONOUS: That is to say, when you conceive the real existence of qualities, you do withal conceive something which you cannot conceive?

HYLAS: It was wrong, I own....

PHILONOUS:.... But (to pass by all that has been hitherto said and reckon it for nothing, if you will have it so) I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for ... any sensible object whatever to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.
HYLAS: If it comes to that, the point will soon be decided. What more easy than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of and unperceived by any mind whatsoever? I do at this present time conceive them existing after that manner.

PHILONOUS: How say you, Hylas, can you see a thing which is at the same time unseen?

HYLAS: No, that were a contradiction.

PHILONOUS: Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of conceiving a thing which is unconceived?

HYLAS: It is.

PHILONOUS: The tree or house therefore which you think of is conceived by you?

HYLAS: How should it be otherwise?

PHILONOUS: And what is conceived is surely in the mind?

HYLAS: Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind....

PHILONOUS: You acknowledge then that you cannot possibly conceive how any one corporeal sensible thing should exist otherwise than in a mind?

HYLAS: I do....

THE SECOND DIALOGUE

PHILONOUS: ... To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that, seeing they depend not on my thought and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other Mind wherein they exist. As sure, therefore, as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent Spirit who contains and supports it.

HYLAS: What! This is no more than I and all Christians hold — nay, and all others too who believe there is a God and that He knows and comprehends all things.

PHILONOUS: Aye, but here lies the difference. Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God; whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by Him.

HYLAS: But, so long as we all believe the same thing, what matter is it how we come by that belief?

PHILONOUS: But neither do we agree in the same opinion. For philosophers, though they acknowledge all corporeal beings to be perceived by God, yet
they attribute to them an absolute subsistence distinct from their being perceived by any mind whatever; which I do not. Besides, is there no difference between saying There is a God, therefore He perceives all things and saying Sensible things do really exist; and, if they really exist, they are necessarily perceived by an infinite Mind: therefore there is an infinite Mind, or God? This furnishes you with a direct and immediate demonstration, from a most evident principle, of the being of a God. Divines and philosophers had proved beyond all controversy, from the beauty and usefulness of the several parts of the creation, that it was the workmanship of God. But that – setting aside all help of astronomy and natural philosophy, all contemplation of the contrivance, order, and adjustment of things – an infinite Mind should be necessarily inferred from the bare existence of the sensible world, is an advantage to them only who have made this easy reflection – that the sensible world is that which we perceive by our several senses, and that nothing is perceived by the senses beside ideas, and that no idea or archetype of an idea can exist otherwise than in a mind. You may now, without any laborious search into the sciences, without any subtlety of reason or tedious length of discourse, oppose and baffle the most strenuous advocate for atheism.... It is evident that the things I perceive are my own ideas, and that no idea can exist unless it be in a mind. Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. They must therefore exist in some other Mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me. The things, I say, immediately perceived are ideas or sensations, call them which you will. But how can any idea or sensation exist in or be produced by anything but a mind or spirit? This indeed is inconceivable. And to assert that which is inconceivable is to talk nonsense, is it not?

HYLAS: Without doubt.

PHILONOUS: But on the other hand, it is very conceivable that they should exist in and be produced by a Spirit, since this is no more than I daily experience in myself, inasmuch as I perceive numberless ideas and, by an act of my will, can form a great variety of them and raise them up in my imagination – though, it must be confessed, these creatures of the fancy are not altogether so distinct, so strong, vivid, and permanent, as those perceived by my senses, which latter are called real things. From all which I conclude there is a Mind which affects me every moment with all the sensible impressions I perceive. And from the variety, order, and manner of these, I conclude the Author of them to be wise, powerful, and good, beyond comprehension.