IN OPPOSITION TO SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS

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. . . . I . . . shall be obliged to you if you will permit me to go on in the same vein. . . . I was considering the odd fate of those men who have in all ages, through an affectation of being distinguished from the vulgar, or some unaccountable turn of thought, pretended either to believe nothing at all or to believe the most extravagant things in the world. This, however, might be borne if their paradoxes and skepticism did not draw after them some consequences of general disadvantage to mankind. But the mischief lies here: that when men of less leisure see them who are supposed to have spent their whole time in the pursuits of knowledge professing an entire ignorance of all things or advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and commonly received principles, they will be tempted

to entertain suspicions concerning the most important truths, which they had hitherto held sacred and unquestionable.

**Philonous.**
I entirely agree with you as to the ill tendency of the affected doubts of some philosophers and fantastical conceits of others.

**Hylas.**
I am glad to find there was nothing in the accounts I heard of you. 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 sceptical 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?

**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.**
Well then, are you content to admit that opinion for true which, upon examination, shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from skepticism?
Hylas.
With all my heart. . . .

Philonous.
Pray, Hylas, what do you mean by a “skeptic?”

Hylas.
I mean what all men mean, one that doubts of everything.

Philonous.
He then who entertains no doubt concerning some particular point, with regard to that point cannot be thought a skeptic. . . .

Philonous.
He then that denies any point can no more be said to doubt of it than he who affirms it with the same degree of assurance.

Hylas.
True. . . .

Philonous.
How comes it to pass then, Hylas, that you pronounce me a skeptic because I deny what you affirm, to wit, the existence of matter? Since, for aught you can tell, I am as peremptory in my denial as you in your affirmation.

Hylas.
Hold, Philonous, . . . I said indeed that a “skeptic” was one who doubted of everything; but I should have added: or who denies the reality and truth of things. . . . What think you of distrusting the senses, of denying the real existence of sensible things, or pretending to know nothing of them. Is not this sufficient to denominate a man a skeptic?

Philonous.
Shall we therefore examine which of us it is that denies the reality of sensible things or professes the greatest ignorance of them, since, if I take you rightly, he is to be esteemed the greatest skeptic?

Hylas.
That is what I desire.
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.
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, etc. 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.
[I]t were absurd to think God or virtue sensible things. . . .

Philonous.
It seems, then, that by “sensible things” you mean those only which can be perceived immediately by sense. . . .

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.
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 is then 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.
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.
How then can a great heat exist in it, since you own it cannot in a material substance? I desire you would clear this point.
Hylas.
Hold, Philonous, I fear I was out 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.
Seeing . . . 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. . . . 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.
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,

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, . . . To make the point still clearer, . . . [w]hen a pin pricks your finger, does it not rend and divide the fibres of your flesh? . . . And when a coal burns your finger . . . ? Since, . . . 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? . . . 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.
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 further 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.
In the next place, odors are to be considered. And with regard to these I would fain know whether what has been said of tastes does not exactly agree to them? Are they not so many pleasing or displeasing sensations?

Hylas.
They are.

Philonous.
Can you then conceive it possible that they should exist in an unperceiving thing?
Hylas.
I cannot. . . .

Philonous.
Then as to sounds, what must we think of them, are they accidents really inherent in external bodies or not?

Hylas.
That they inhere not in the sonorous bodies is plain from hence; because a bell struck in the exhausted receiver of an air-pump sends forth no sound. The air, therefore, must be thought the subject of sound. . . . It is this very motion in the external air that produces in the mind the sensation of sound. For, striking on the drum of the ear, it causes a vibration which by the auditory nerves being communicated to the brain, the soul is thereupon affected with the sensation called “sound.”

Philonous.
What! Is sound then a sensation? . . . How then can sound, being a sensation, exist in the air if by the “air” you mean a senseless substance existing without the mind?

Hylas.
You must distinguish, Philonous, between sound as it is perceived by us, and as it is in itself; or (which is the same thing) between the sound we immediately perceive and that which exists without us. The former, indeed, is a particular kind of sensation, but the latter is merely a vibrative or undulatory motion in the air.

Philonous.
I thought I had already obviated that distinction by the answer I gave when you were applying it in a like case before.

Hylas.
[A]fter the concessions already made, I had as well grant that sounds, too, have no real being without the mind.

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.
... [I]n saying “each visible object has that color which we see in it,” you make visible objects to be corporeal substances, which implies either that corporeal substances are sensible qualities or else that there is something besides sensible qualities perceived by sight; but as this point was formerly agreed between us, and is still maintained by you, it is a clear consequence that your corporeal substance is nothing distinct from sensible qualities.

Hylas.
You may draw as many absurd consequences as you please and endeavor to perplex the plainest things, but you shall never persuade me out of my senses....

Philonous.
... [A]re 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.... which, appearing only at a distance, vanish upon a nearer approach.

Philonous.
Is the nearest and exactest survey made by the help of a microscope 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.

* * *
Besides, it is not only possible but manifest that there actually are animals whose eyes are by nature framed to perceive those things which by reason of their minuteness escape our sight... Even our own eyes do not always represent objects to us after the same manner. In the jaundice everyone knows that all things seem yellow. Is it not therefore highly probable those animals in whose eyes we discern a very different texture from that of ours, and whose bodies abound with different humors, do not see the same colors in every object that we do? From all which should it not seem to follow that all colors are equally apparent, and that none of those which we perceive are really inherent in any outward object?

Hylas.
It should.

Philonous.
The point will be past all doubt if you consider that, in case colors were real properties or affections inherent in external bodies, they could admit of no alteration without some change wrought in the very bodies themselves; but is it not evident from what has been said that, upon the use of microscopes, upon a change happening in the humors of the eye, or a variation of distance, without any manner of real alteration in the thing itself, the colors of any object are either changed or totally disappear? Nay, all other circumstances remaining the same, change but the situation of some objects and they shall present different colors to the eye.

...
apprised of. For my part I have been a long time sensible there was such an opinion current among philosophers, but was never thoroughly convinced of its truth till now.

**Philonous.**

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

A mite . . . 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?

. . .

[A]s 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 . . ., and yet I am loath to give up *extension*; I see so many odd consequences following upon such a concession.

. . .

**Philonous.**

. . . [D]o but consider that if *extension* be once acknowledged to have no existence without the mind, the same must necessarily be granted of motion, solidity, and gravity, since they all evidently suppose extension. It is therefore superfluous to inquire particularly concerning each of them. In denying extension, you have denied them all to have any real existence. . . .

**Hylas.**

It is just come into my head, Philonous, that I have somewhere heard of a distinction between *absolute* and *sensible* extension. Now though it be acknowledged that *great* and *small*, consisting merely in the relation which other
extended beings have to the parts of our own bodies, do not really inhere in the substances themselves, yet nothing obliges us to hold the same with regard to absolute extension, which is something abstracted from great and small, from this or that particular magnitude or figure. So likewise as to motion: swift and slow are altogether relative to the succession of ideas in our own minds. But it does not follow, because those modifications of motion exist not without the mind, that therefore absolute motion abstracted from them does not.

Philonous.
Pray what is it that distinguishes one motion, or one part of extension, from another? Is it not something sensible, as some degree of swiftness or slowness, some certain magnitude or figure peculiar to each?

Hylas.
I think so.

Philonous.
These qualities, therefore, stripped of all sensible properties, are without all specific and numerical differences, as the schools call them.

Hylas.
They are.

Philonous.
That is to say, they are extension in general, and motion in general.

Hylas.
Let it be so.

Philonous.
. . . If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension divested of all those sensible modes as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of.

Hylas.
To confess ingenuously, I cannot. . . .
Philonous.
I acknowledge, Hylas, it is not difficult to form general propositions and reasonings about those qualities without mentioning any other, and, in this sense, to consider or treat of them abstractedly. But how does it follow that, because I can pronounce the word “motion” by itself, I can form the idea of it in my mind exclusive of body?

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Consequently, the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities are, without any further application of force, against the primary, too. Besides, if you will trust your senses, is it not plain all sensible qualities coexist, or to them appear as being in the same place? Do they ever represent a motion or figure as being divested of all other visible and tangible qualities?

Hylas.
You need say no more on this head. I am free to own, if there be no secret error or oversight in our proceedings hitherto, that all sensible qualities are alike to be denied existence without the mind. But my fear is that I have been too liberal in my former concessions, or overlooked some fallacy or other. In short, I did not take time to think. . . . One great oversight I take to be this—that I did not sufficiently distinguish the object from the sensation. Now, though this latter may not exist without the mind, yet it will not thence follow that the former cannot.

Philonous.
What object do you mean? The object of the senses?

Hylas.
The same.

Philonous.
It is then immediately perceived?

Hylas.
Right. . . . For example, there is red and yellow on that tulip. . . . I would say they have a real existence without the mind, in some unthinking substance.

* * *
Philonous.

. . . [D]o but consider the point and then confess ingenuously whether light and colors, tastes, sounds, etc. are not all equally passions or sensations in the soul. You may indeed call them “external objects” and give them in words what subsistence you please. But examine your own thoughts and then tell me whether it be not as I say?

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.

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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?

... 

If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or 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.
The tree or house, therefore, which you think of is conceived by you?... And what is conceived is surely in the mind?

Hylas.
Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind.

Philonous.
How then came you to say you conceived a house or tree existing independent and out of all minds whatsoever?

Hylas.
... I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of, not considering that I myself conceived it all the while. But now I plainly see that all I can do is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them existing out of the minds of all spirits.
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.

Philonous.
And yet you will earnestly contend for the truth of that which you cannot so much as conceive?

Hylas.
I profess I know not what to think; but still there are some scruples remain with me. Is it not certain I see things at a distance? Do we not perceive the stars and moon, for example, to be a great way off? Is not this, I say, manifest to the senses?

Philonous.
Do you not in a dream, too, perceive those or the like objects? . . . And have they not then the same appearance of being distant? . . . But you do not thence conclude the apparitions in a dream to be without the mind?

Hylas.
By no means.

Philonous.
You ought not therefore to conclude that sensible objects are without the mind, from their appearance or manner wherein they are perceived.

Hylas.
I acknowledge it. But does not my sense deceive me in those cases?

Philonous.
By no means. The idea or thing which you immediately perceive, neither sense nor reason informs you that it actually exists without the mind. By sense you only know that you are affected with such certain sensations of light and colors, etc. And these you will not say are without the mind.
Hylas.
True, but, besides all that, do you not think the sight suggests something of outness or distance? . . .

Philonous.
Good Hylas, do but reflect a little on the point, and then tell me whether there be any more in it than this. From the ideas you actually perceive by sight, you have by experience learned to collect what other ideas you will (according to the standing order of nature) be affected with, after such a certain succession of time and motion.

Hylas.
Upon the whole, I take it to be nothing else.

Philonous.
Now is it not plain that if we suppose a man born blind was on a sudden made to see, he could at first have no experience of what may be suggested by sight?

Hylas.
It is.

Philonous.
He would not then, according to you, have any notion of distance annexed to the things he saw, but would take them for a new set of sensations existing only in his mind?

Hylas.
It is undeniable.

[But, inform me, Philonous, can we perceive or know nothing besides our ideas? . . . To speak the truth, Philonous, I think there are two kinds of objects: the one perceived immediately, which are likewise called “ideas”; the other are real things or external objects, perceived by the mediation of ideas which are their images and representations. Now I own ideas do not exist without the mind, but the latter sort of objects do. I am sorry I did not think of this distinction sooner; it would probably have cut short your discourse.]
Philonous.
Are those external objects perceived by sense or by some other faculty?

Hylas.
They are perceived by sense. . . . For example, when I look on a picture or statue of Julius Caesar, I may be said, after a manner, to perceive him (though not immediately) by my senses.

Philonous.
It seems then you will have our ideas, which alone are immediately perceived, to be pictures of external things: and that these also are perceived by sense inasmuch as they have a conformity or resemblance to our ideas?

Hylas.
That is my meaning.

. . .

Philonous.
. . . I grant we may, in one acceptation, be said to perceive sensible things mediately by sense—that is, when, from a frequently perceived connection, the immediate perception of ideas by one sense suggest to the mind others, perhaps belonging to another sense, which are wont to be connected with them. For instance, when I hear a coach drive along the streets, immediately I perceive only the sound; but from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach. It is nevertheless evident that, in truth and strictness, nothing can be heard but sound; and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense but suggested from experience. . . .

Hylas.
I see, Philonous, . . . but that will never convince me.

Philonous.
My aim is only to learn from you the way to come at the knowledge of “material beings.” Whatever we perceive is perceived either immediately or mediately—by sense, or by reason and reflection. But, as you have excluded sense, pray show me what reason you have to believe their existence, or what medium you can possibly make use of to prove it, either to mine or your own understanding.
Hylas.
To deal ingenuously, Philonous, now [that] I consider the point, I do not find I can give you any good reason for it. But this much seems pretty plain, that it is at least possible such things may really exist. And as long as there is no absurdity in supposing them, I am resolved to believe as I did, till you bring good reasons to the contrary.

THE SECOND DIALOGUE

Hylas.
I beg your pardon, Philonous, for not meeting you sooner. All this morning my head was so filled with our late conversation that I had not leisure to think of the time of the day, or indeed of anything else. . . . I own there is a great deal in what you say. Nor can anyone be more entirely satisfied of the truth of those odd consequences so long as I have in view the reasonings that lead to them. But when these are out of my thoughts, there seems, on the other hand, something so satisfactory, so natural and intelligible in the modern way of explaining things that I profess I know not how to reject it.

Philonous.
I know not what way you mean.

Hylas.
I mean the way of accounting for our sensations or ideas.

Philonous.
How is that?

Hylas.
It is supposed the soul makes her residence in some part of the brain, from which the nerves take their rise, and are thence extended to all parts of the body; and that outward objects, by the different impressions they make on the organs of sense, communicate certain vibrative motions to the nerves, and these, being filled with spirits, propagate them to the brain or seat of the soul, which, according to the various impressions or traces thereby made in the brain, is variously affected with ideas.
Philonous.
And call you this an explication of the manner whereby we are affected with ideas?

Hylas.
Why not, Philonous; have you anything to object against it?

Philonous.
... Pray tell me whether by the “brain” you mean any sensible thing.

Hylas.
What else think you I could mean?

Philonous.
Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and those things which are immediately perceivable are ideas, and these exist only in the mind. . . . The brain therefore you speak of, being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind. Now I would fain know whether you think it reasonable to suppose that one idea or thing existing in the mind occasions all other ideas. And if you think so, pray how do you account for the origin of that primary idea or brain itself? . . .

Hylas.
I begin to suspect my hypothesis.

Philonous.
Besides spirits, all that we know or conceive are our own ideas. When, therefore, you say all ideas are occasioned by impressions in the brain, do you conceive this brain or no? If you do, then you talk of ideas imprinted in an idea causing that same idea, which is absurd. If you do not conceive it, you talk unintelligibly, instead of forming a reasonable hypothesis.

Hylas.
I now clearly see it was a mere dream. There is nothing in it. . . .

Philonous.
Well then, are you at length satisfied that no sensible things have a real existence, and that you are in truth an arrant skeptic?
Hylas.
It is too plain to be denied.


My comfort is you are as much a skeptic as I am.

Philonous.
There, Hylas, I must beg leave to differ from you. . . . You indeed said the reality of sensible things consisted in an absolute existence out of the minds of spirits, or distinct from their being perceived. And, pursuant to this notion of reality, you are obliged to deny sensible things any real existence; that is, according to your own definition, you profess yourself a skeptic. But I neither said nor thought the reality of sensible things was to be defined after that manner. 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?


I think I understand you very clearly and own the proof you give of a Deity seems no less evident than it is surprising. But allowing that God is the
supreme and universal cause of all things, yet may there not be still a third nature besides spirits and ideas? May we not admit a subordinate and limited cause of our ideas? In a word, may there not for all that be matter? . . .

Philonous.
Pray let me know what reasoning your belief of matter is grounded on, and what this matter is in your present sense of it.

Hylas.
I find myself affected with various ideas whereof I know I am not the cause. . . . They have therefore some cause distinct from me and them, of which I pretend to know no more than that it is the cause of my ideas. And this thing, whatever it be, I call “matter.”

Philonous.
Tell me, Hylas, has everyone a liberty to change the current proper signification annexed to a common name in any language? For example, suppose a traveler should tell you that in a certain country men pass unhurt through the fire; and, upon explaining himself, you found he meant by the word “fire” that which others call “water”; or, if he should assert that there are trees that walk upon two legs, meaning men by the term “trees.” Would you think this reasonable?

Hylas.
No, I should think it very absurd. Common custom is the standard of propriety in language. . . .

Philonous.
And does not “matter,” in the common current acceptation of the word, signify an extended, solid, movable, unthinking, inactive substance?

Hylas.
It does.

Philonous.
And has it not been made evident that no such substance can possibly exist? . . .

Hylas.
There is indeed something in what you say. But I am afraid you do not thoroughly comprehend my meaning. I would by no means be thought to deny
that God, or an infinite Spirit, is the Supreme Cause of all things. All I contend for is that, subordinate to the Supreme Agent, there is a cause of a limited and inferior nature which concurs in the production of our ideas, not by any act of will or spiritual efficiency, but by that kind of action which belongs to matter, viz., motion.

Philonous.
...I ask whether all your ideas are not perfectly passive and inert, including nothing of action in them.

Hylas.
They are.

Philonous.
And are sensible qualities anything else but ideas?

Hylas.
How often have I acknowledged that they are not.

Philonous.
But is not motion a sensible quality?

Hylas.
It is.

Philonous.
Consequently, it is no action?

Hylas.
I agree with you. And indeed it is very plain that when I stir my finger it remains passive, but my will which produced the motion is active.

Philonous.
Now I desire to know, in the first place, whether, motion being allowed to be no action, you can conceive any action besides volition; and, in the second place, whether to say something and conceive nothing be not to talk nonsense; and, lastly, whether, having considered the premises, you do not perceive that to suppose any efficient or active cause of our ideas other than spirit is highly absurd and unreasonable?
Hylas.
Be that as it will, yet I still insist upon it, that our not being able to conceive a thing is no argument against its existence. . . .

Philonous.
. . . [W]here neither reason nor revelation induces us to believe the existence of a thing, where we have not even a relative notion of it, where an abstraction is made from perceiving and being perceived, from spirit and idea, lastly, where there is not so much as the most inadequate or faint idea pretended to, . . . my inference shall be that you mean nothing at all, that you employ words to no manner of purpose, without any design or signification whatsoever. And I leave it to you to consider how mere jargon should be treated.

Hylas.
To deal frankly with you, Philonous, your arguments seem in themselves unanswerable, but they have not so great an effect on me as to produce that entire conviction, that hearty acquiescence, which attends demonstration. I find myself still relapsing into an obscure surmise of I know not what—matter. . . . The reality of things cannot be maintained without supposing the existence of matter. And is not this, think you, a good reason why I should be earnest in its defense?

Philonous.
The reality of things! What things, sensible or intelligible?

Hylas.
Sensible things.

Philonous.
My glove, for example?

Hylas.
That or any other thing perceived by the senses.

Philonous.
But to fix on some particular thing, is it not a sufficient evidence to me of the existence of this glove that I see it and feel it and wear it? . . .
Hylas.
Upon the whole, I am content to own the existence of matter is highly improbable; but the direct and absolute impossibility of it does not appear to me. . . .

Philonous.
I deny it to be possible; and have, if I mistake not, evidently proved, from your own concessions, that it is not. In the common sense of the word “matter,” is there any more implied than an extended, solid, figured, movable substance existing without the mind? And have not you acknowledged, over and over, that you have seen evident reason for denying the possibility of such a substance?

Hylas.
True, but that is only one sense of the term “matter.”

Philonous.
But is it not the only proper genuine received sense? And if matter in such a sense be proved impossible, may it not be thought with good grounds absolutely impossible? Else how could anything be proved impossible? . . .

Hylas.
I agree with you.

Philonous.
Now, in that which you call the obscure indefinite sense of the word “matter,” it is plain, by your own confession, there was included no idea at all, no sense except an unknown sense, which is the same thing as none. You are not, therefore, to expect I should prove a repugnancy between ideas where there are no ideas, or the impossibility of matter taken in an unknown sense, that is, no sense at all. My business was only to show you meant nothing; and this you were brought to own. So that, in all your various senses, you have been shown either to mean nothing at all or, if anything, an absurdity. . . .

THE THIRD DIALOGUE

Philonous.
Tell me, Hylas, what are the fruits of yesterday’s meditation? Has it confirmed you in the same mind you were in at parting, or have you since seen cause to change your opinion?
Hylas.
Truly my opinion is that all our opinions are alike vain and uncertain. What we approve today, we condemn tomorrow. . . . There is not that single thing in the world whereof we can know the real nature, or what it is in itself.

Philonous.
Will you tell me I do not really know what fire or water is?

Hylas.
You may indeed know that fire appears hot, and water fluid; but this is no more than knowing what sensations are produced in your own mind upon the application of fire and water to your organs of sense. Their internal constitution, their true and real nature, you are utterly in the dark as to that.

. . .

Philonous.
You amaze me. Was ever anything more wild and extravagant than the notions you now maintain? And is it not evident you are led into all these extravagances by the belief of material substance? This makes you dream of those unknown natures in everything. It is this occasions your distinguishing between the reality and sensible appearances of things. It is to this you are indebted for being ignorant of what everybody else knows perfectly well. . . .

Hylas.
I agree with you. “Material substance” was no more than a hypothesis, and a false and groundless one, too. I will no longer spend my breath in defense of it. But whatever hypothesis you advance or whatsoever scheme of things you introduce in its stead, I doubt not it will appear every whit as false; let me but be allowed to question you upon it. . . .

Philonous.
I assure you, Hylas, I do not pretend to frame any hypothesis at all. I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion that the real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my senses. These I know and, finding they answer all the necessities and purposes of life, have no reason to be solicitous about any other unknown beings. A piece of sensible bread, for instance, would stay my stomach better than ten thousand times as much of that insen-
sible, unintelligible real bread you speak of. It is likewise my opinion that colors and other sensible qualities are on the objects. I cannot for my life help thinking that snow is white, and fire hot. You, indeed, who by “snow” and “fire” mean certain external, unperceived, unperceiving substances are in the right to deny whiteness or heat to be affections inherent in them. But I who understand by those words the things I see and feel am obliged to think like other folks. And as I am no skeptic with regard to the nature of things, so neither am I as to their existence. . . . Away then with all that skepticism, all those ridiculous philosophical doubts. What a jest is it for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things till he has it proved to him from the veracity of God, or to pretend our knowledge in this point falls short of intuition or demonstration. I might as well doubt of my own being as of the being of those things I actually see and feel.

Hylas.
Not so fast, Philonous: You say you cannot conceive how sensible things should exist without the mind. Do you not?

Philonous.
I do.

Hylas.
Supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive it possible that things perceivable by sense may still exist?

Philonous.
I can, but then it must be in another mind. When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them, as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And as the same is true with regard to all other finite created spirits, it necessarily follows there is an omnipresent eternal Mind which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner and according to such rules as He Himself has ordained and are by us termed the “laws of nature.”
Hylas.
Answer me, Philonous. Are all our ideas perfectly inert beings? Or have they any agency included in them?

Philonous.
They are altogether passive and inert.

Hylas.
And is not God an agent, a being purely active?

Philonous.
I acknowledge it.

Hylas.
No idea, therefore, can be like unto or represent the nature of God.

Philonous.
It cannot.

Hylas.
Since, therefore, you have no idea of the mind of God, how can you conceive it possible that things should exist in His mind? Or, if you can conceive the mind of God without having an idea of it, why may not I be allowed to conceive the existence of matter, notwithstanding I have no idea of it?

Philonous.
As to your first question: I own I have properly no idea either of God or any other spirit; for these, being active, cannot be represented by things perfectly inert as our ideas are. I do nevertheless know that I, who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly as I know my ideas exist. Further, I know what I mean by the terms “I” and “myself”; and I know this immediately or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a color, or a sound. The mind, spirit, or soul is that indivisible unextended thing which thinks, acts, and perceives. I say “indivisible,” because unextended; and “unextended,” because extended, figured, movable things are ideas; and that which perceives ideas, which thinks and wills, is plainly itself no idea, nor like an idea. Ideas are things inactive and perceived. And spirits a sort of beings altogether different from them. I do not therefore say my soul is an idea, or like an idea. However, taking the word “idea” in a large sense, my
soul may be said to furnish me with an idea, that is, an image or likeness of God, though indeed extremely inadequate. For all the notion I have of God is obtained by reflecting on my own soul, heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. . . . All which makes the case of matter widely different from that of the Deity.

Hylas.
I own myself satisfied in this point. But do you in earnest think the real existence of sensible things consists in their being actually perceived? If so, how comes it that all mankind distinguish between them? Ask the first man you meet, and he shall tell you, “to be perceived” is one thing, and “to exist” is another.

Philonous.
I am content, Hylas, to appeal to the common sense of the world for the truth of my notion. Ask the gardener why he thinks yonder cherry tree exists in the garden, and he shall tell you, because he sees and feels it; in a word, because he perceives it by his senses. Ask him why he thinks an orange tree not to be there, and he shall tell you, because he does not perceive it. . . . The question between the materialists and me is not whether things have a real existence out of the mind of this or that person, but, whether they have an absolute existence, distinct from being perceived by God, and exterior to all minds. . . .

Hylas.
But, according to your notions, what difference is there between real things and chimeras formed by the imagination or the visions of a dream, since they are all equally in the mind?

Philonous.
The ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct; they have, besides, an entire dependence on the will. But the ideas perceived by sense, that is, real things, are more vivid and clear, and, being imprinted on the mind by a spirit distinct from us, have not the like dependence on our will. . . .

Hylas.
But still, Philonous, you hold there is nothing in the world but spirits and ideas. And this you must needs acknowledge sounds very oddly.
Philonous.
I own the word “idea,” not being commonly used for “thing,” sounds something out of the way. My reason for using it was because a necessary relation to the mind is understood to be implied by the term; and it is now commonly used by philosophers to denote the immediate objects of the understanding. But however oddly the proposition may sound in words, yet it includes nothing so very strange or shocking in its sense, which in effect amounts to no more than this, to wit, that there are only things perceiving and things perceived, or that every unthinking being is necessarily, and from the very nature of its existence, perceived by some mind, if not by any finite created mind, yet certainly by the infinite mind of God, in whom “we live, and move, and have our being.” . . .