

Analytical Table of Contents

A TREATISE CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

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Editor's Introduction

If a tree falls in the forest when there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? George Berkeley answers that if there is really no one around, then not only is there no sound, but there is no tree, and no forest. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* his surprising answer receives its fullest defense.

What we now call the *Principles* is actually only the first part of a book Berkeley once hoped would include at least two parts. Part II was supposed to be about ethics, freedom of the will, and the nature of God, but Berkeley lost the manuscript while traveling in Italy, and never found the time "to do so disagreeable a thing as writing twice on the same subject" (Letter to Johnson, *Works* II, p. 282).¹ In the part that survives he argues that physical objects depend for their existence on the mind (sections 1-33), defends this view against a series of philosophical and religious objections (sections 34-84), and examines its consequences for skepticism and atheism (sections 85-100), natural science (or "natural philosophy," as it was then called, sections 101-117), mathematics (sections 118-134), the human soul (sections 135-145), and belief in God (section 146 to the end). But he does not leap into all this right away. He begins instead with an important Introduction on "the nature and abuse of language."

1. Abstract ideas

To appreciate Berkeley's Introduction it is important to share his sense of mystery over the capacity of mind and language to refer to things in the world. This capacity is especially mysterious in the case of language, because the words we use to refer to things could be other than they are. There is nothing special about the word "chair," for example, that accounts for its ability to refer to chairs. *We* use the word, but speakers

1. Sources of quotations from Berkeley are cited in the text. Citations include an abbreviated title of the work, followed in most cases by a section, dialogue, or entry number. Where it is not clear from the context, passages from the Introduction to the *Principles* are identified by the word "Introduction." For quotations from the *Three Dialogues*, the First Draft of the Introduction to the *Principles*, and the correspondence with Johnson, I indicate volume and page number in the Luce and Jessop edition of Berkeley's *Works*. For the *Dialogues*, I also give the page number in Adams' edition. Details on works cited are in the chronology and bibliography.