

Reference:

Abel, Donald. Fifty Readings Plus: An Introduction to Philosophy, Second Edition, McGraw Hill, 1994

READING 14

Meditations on First Philosophy

René Descartes

René Descartes was born in La Haye (now called Descartes), France, in 1596. As a youth he was educated by the Jesuits at their college in La Flèche. In about 1614 he began studying at the University of Poitiers, receiving his law degree in 1616. Deciding to travel rather than practice law, he went to Holland in 1618 to serve in the army of Dutch Prince Maurice of Nassau as a gentleman volunteer. One day in November 1619, while on a military tour of Germany, Descartes sat alone in a room, reflecting on a new philosophical system that would unify all branches of knowledge and give them the certainty of mathematics. That night he had three dreams, which he interpreted as a divine commission to construct this new system of knowledge. He left the army shortly afterwards and traveled for several years.

In 1628 he settled in Holland, where he lived for more than twenty years. There he did research in science and in mathematics (laying the foundations for analytic geometry) and developed his philosophy. In 1649, after much hesitation, Descartes acceded to the request of Queen Christina of Sweden to go to Stockholm to tutor her in philosophy. The harsh winter and the rigorous schedule imposed on him by the queen (philosophy lessons at five o'clock in the morning, for example) took their toll on his health: He died of pneumonia in 1650.

Descartes' major works are *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (written in 1628, published posthumously), *Discourse on Method* (1637), *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), and *The Passions of the Soul* (1649).

Our reading is from *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (By "first philosophy" Descartes means truths about the basic topics of philosophy, which for him are God, the soul [mind], and the external world.) In the First Meditation, Descartes explains his "method of doubt": He will not accept as true anything of which he cannot be absolutely certain. But practically everything seems open to doubt; Descartes reflects that he might even be deceived in his belief that there is an external world, for how can he be sure that there is not some powerful "malicious demon" who tricks him into thinking there is an external world by placing images directly in his mind?

In the Second Meditation, Descartes realizes that he can be absolutely certain of at least one thing—that he exists, for even if he is deceived about the existence of the external world, he could not be deceived unless he existed. As he formulates this argument elsewhere, "I think, therefore I am." This "I" that exists is "a thing that thinks." Descartes goes on to argue that, if there were material things, their essential nature would be extension (three-dimensionality), and that extension is grasped by the mind, not by the senses.

In our selection from the Third Meditation, Descartes reflects on the certitude of his own existence and formulates a general criterion for truth: "all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true." He then presents a proof for the existence of God. He finds that his mind contains an idea of an infinite being and reasons that he himself—who is merely a *finite* being—could not have invented such an idea. Descartes concludes that the idea of an infinite being must have been placed in his mind by the infinite being itself. Therefore, this infinite being (God) exists.

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding

John Locke

John Locke was born in Wrington, England, in 1632. After attending Westminster School, he enrolled in Oxford University, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1656 and his master's degree two years later. He then taught Latin and Greek at Oxford. In 1661 he began the study of medicine. He was appointed censor of moral philosophy in 1664, but two years later he left Oxford to become the personal physician of influential politician Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury. He completed his medical degree in 1674. Locke then spent four years in France (1675–1679), where he explored the philosophical ideas of René Descartes, Pierre Gassendi, and others. The England to which Locke returned was in political turmoil, and Shaftesbury fled to Holland in 1682. The next year, Locke, who was under suspicion because of his close association with Shaftesbury, also fled to Holland. He returned to England in 1689 and the next year published two major philosophical works that were the fruit of many years of thought: *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and *Two Treatises of Government*. Locke continued to write and publish, his final project (published posthumously) being a series of commentaries on the epistles of Paul. He died in Oates in 1704 at the age of seventy-two.

Locke's main works, in addition to the *Essay* and the *Two Treatises*, are *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), and *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).

Our selection is from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Locke begins by rejecting the view, popular in his day, that the mind is endowed with innate principles—the view that the mind, by its very nature, prior to any experience, knows such truths as “it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be.” He argues that such principles cannot be innate because some people (“children and idiots”) have no knowledge of them. Locke then proceeds to present his own theory of how ideas enter the mind. The mind is originally blank, like a sheet of white paper; ideas are imprinted through experience. All ideas arise either through sensation (experience of external objects) or reflection (experience of the operations of the mind). According to Locke, “we have nothing in our minds which did not come about in one of these two ways.” After experience has furnished the mind with simple ideas, the mind can go on to combine them into complex ideas that are not the direct objects of experience.

Locke then explains how ideas are related to qualities. By “quality” he means the power by which an object can produce an idea in the mind. For example, to say that a snowball has the qualities of being round and white means that it can create these ideas in us. Locke proceeds to distinguish two kinds of qualities. *Primary qualities* (which Locke also calls *original qualities*) are those that can produce ideas that resemble the object and really

exist in it; examples of these qualities are figure, extension, and motion or rest. *Secondary qualities*, by contrast, can produce ideas that do *not* resemble the object and do *not* exist in it; examples of such qualities are color, sound, and taste. Thus, although we experience a snowball as both round and white, it really is round but really is not white. Locke goes on to explain *how* qualities produce ideas in us.

Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous

George Berkeley

George Berkeley (pronounced *bar'klee*) was born near Thomastown in County Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1685. After studying at Kilkenny College, he entered Trinity College in Dublin, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1704. Three years later he became a fellow at Trinity; three years after that he was ordained to the Anglican priesthood. He went to London in 1713 and later made two extended trips to the Continent (1713–1714 and 1716–1720). In 1724 he was appointed ecclesiastical dean of Derry. Berkeley became increasingly interested in the New World and decided to establish a college in Bermuda to train colonists, Native Americans, and blacks for the ministry. Funding from the British government appeared likely, and in 1728 Berkeley went to Newport, Rhode Island, to set up farms to supply food for the college. In 1731, when it became clear that funding would be not be granted, Berkeley returned to London. Three years later he was consecrated Bishop of Cloyne, Ireland. In 1752, after serving as bishop for nineteen years, he retired to Oxford. He died there the following year.

Berkeley's major works are *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), and *Alciphron* (1732).

Our selection is taken from the *Dialogues*, which are conversations between the fictional characters Hylas (whose name derives from the Greek word for matter) and Philonous ("lover of the mind"). The first dialogue opens with Hylas expressing amazement at Philonous' (Berkeley's) view that there is no such thing as matter. A material thing is

something perceived by the senses, and what the senses perceive are qualities such as color and heat. Philonous argues that these qualities do not exist in objects but only in the perceiving mind. Just as the sensations of pleasure and pain exist only in a perceiving subject, so do the sensations of color and heat. Using a distinction made by John Locke and others, Hylas agrees that "secondary qualities," such as color and heat, exist only in the mind but maintains that "primary qualities," such as extension (three-dimensionality) and figure, really exist in objects. Philonous then convinces Hylas that primary qualities, like secondary ones, exist only as ideas in the mind. Hylas then argues that matter, although devoid of primary and secondary qualities, must exist as a sort of substratum that causes our sensations. But when questioned about this supposed substratum, Hylas admits that he has no idea what it is. Hylas agrees with Philonous that it is contradictory to conceive of a material object not conceived by a mind.

In the second dialogue, Philonous uses his theory about the mind-dependent nature of material objects to show that God exists. The fact that material things affect us independently of our will shows that their existence does not depend on *our* minds. But since material things are mind-dependent, there must be an infinite mind in which they all exist. And this infinite mind is God.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

A biography of David Hume appears on p. 54.

This reading is from Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume begins by distinguishing between two kinds of perceptions of the mind: impressions and ideas. *Impressions* consist of direct sense experiences of things outside us (sensations) or inside us (passions and emotions); *ideas* are copies of such impressions. Impressions are distinguished from ideas by their greater "force and vivacity"; hearing a sound is an impression, whereas recalling the sound is an idea. Some ideas (for example, a gold mountain) are not direct copies of a particular impression but modifications or combinations of impressions (gold and a mountain). To clarify an idea, we need simply go back to the impression(s) from which it derives.

Hume next inquires about our knowledge of "matters of fact" (things that could be otherwise than they are). He observes that we rely on the notion of cause and effect when we go beyond the matters of fact provided by impressions and memories of impressions. But how do we *know* that one thing is caused by another? Judgments of causality are based on experience; when we see that event A is followed regularly by event B, we infer that A causes B and that, if A occurs in the future, it will be followed by B. But what justifies this inference? It is not based on impressions—for although we do have impressions of A and B as successive events, we have no impression of a third entity, a "cause," that links A and B. Consequently, we can *never know* that there is such a thing as causality. Hume argues that our belief in causality results not from a reasoning process but from the unavoidable human tendency to believe that two events we experience as constantly conjoined are related as cause and effect.

Critique of Pure Reason

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in Königsberg, Prussia, where he spent his entire life. As a boy he attended the Collegium Fridericanum, a school run by the Pietists (the Lutheran sect to which his family belonged). In 1740 he enrolled in the University of Königsberg, where he studied a wide variety of subjects, including theology, philosophy, mathematics, physics, and medicine. He withdrew from the university in 1747 to support himself by working as a private tutor for various families in eastern Prussia. He resumed his studies in 1754 and completed his degree the following year. He then became a lecturer at the University of Königsberg, teaching such diverse subjects as mathematics, geography, mineralogy, and philosophy. Fifteen years later he was appointed professor of logic and metaphysics. His writings—especially his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)—brought him increasing fame, and students came from afar to hear him lecture. In 1797 he stopped lecturing, but he continued to write. He died in Königsberg in 1804 at the age of seventy-nine.

Kant's principal works, in addition to *Critique of Pure Reason*, are *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

Our reading is taken from Kant's second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1787. Kant's project in this book is to investigate how much we can know by "pure reason" (reason itself, apart from any experience). In his preface Kant observes that we typically assume that our knowledge (cognition) must conform to objects—that, when we know something, our minds must match the way the objects are. If this assumption were correct, it would be impossible to have any knowledge of objects a priori (prior to our experience of them). Kant rejects this assumption; he holds the converse, that *objects* must conform to our *knowledge*—that, when we know something, objects must match the way our minds are. Objects conform to our way of receiving sense experience (intuition) and to our way of intellectually synthesizing this sense experience (thought). That is to say, our minds are constructed in such a way that we necessarily *sense* objects through the forms of "sensibility" (namely, space and time) and we necessarily *think* objects through certain "categories" (also called "concepts") of the understanding, such as causality and unity. This means that we can know certain things about objects a priori. For example, we know that we will experience them as existing in space and as being caused. But according to Kant, even though we know that objects will invariably *appear to us* in certain ways, we can never know how things are *in themselves*.

In his introduction Kant explains that a priori knowledge is characterized by necessity and universality. He then explains that some of our judgments (those in mathematics and metaphysics, for example) are not only a priori but synthetic. (A **synthetic statement** adds something to a concept; an **analytic** one does not.) Kant's doctrine about the structure of the mind is designed to explain how such synthetic a priori judgments are possible.

In the final two sections of our reading, Kant gives arguments to show that space and time (the forms of sensibility) are a priori and explains that there are twelve categories of the understanding, corresponding to the twelve kinds of judgment.