

# The Principles of Human Knowledge

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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## Sections 1–50

**1.** Anyone who surveys the objects of human knowledge will easily see that they are all *ideas* that are either •actually imprinted on the senses or •perceived by attending to one’s own emotions and mental activities or •formed out of ideas of the first two types, with the help of memory and imagination, by compounding or dividing or simply reproducing ideas of those other two kinds. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours with their different degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and so on; and each of these also admits of differences of quantity or degree. Smelling supplies me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And when a number of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name and thus to be thought of as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, shape and consistency having been observed to go together, they are taken to be one distinct thing, called an ‘apple’. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and similar perceptible things; and these can arouse the emotions of love, hate, joy, grief, and so on, depending on whether they please or displease us.

**2.** As well as all that endless variety of ideas, or objects of knowledge, there is also something that knows or *perceives* them, and *acts* on them in various ways such as willing, imagining, and remembering. This perceiving, active entity is what I call ‘mind’, ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, or ‘myself’. These words don’t refer to any one of my ideas, but rather to something entirely distinct from them, something *in* which they *exist*, or *by* which they *are perceived*. Those two are equivalent, because the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.

**3.** Everyone will agree that our thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the imagination exist only in the mind. It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them—no matter how they are blended or combined together (that is, no matter what objects they constitute). You can know this intuitively [= ‘you can see this as immediately self-evident’] by attending to what is meant by the term ‘exist’ when it is applied to perceptible things. The table that I am writing on *exists*, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that •if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that •some other spirit actually does perceive it. Similarly,

‘there was an odour’—i.e. it was smelled;

‘there was a sound’—it was heard;

‘there was a colour or shape’—it was seen or felt.

This is all that I can understand by such expressions as these. There are those who speak of things that ·unlike spirits· do not think and ·unlike ideas· exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, *to exist* is *to be perceived*; so they couldn’t possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them.

**4.** It is indeed widely believed that all perceptible objects—houses, mountains, rivers, and so on—really exist independently of being perceived by the understanding. But however widely and confidently this belief may be held, anyone who has the courage to challenge it will—if I’m not mistaken—see that it involves an obvious contradiction. For what are houses, mountains, rivers etc. but things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or

sensations? And isn't it plainly contradictory that *these*, either singly or in combination, should exist unperceived?

**5.** If we thoroughly examine this belief in things existing independently of the mind it will, perhaps, be found to depend basically on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a more delicate and precise strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of perceptible things from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and shapes, in a word the things we see and feel—what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or sense impressions? And can any of *these* be separated, even in thought, from perception? Speaking for myself, I would find it no easier to do that than to divide a thing from itself! I don't deny that I can abstract (if indeed this is properly called abstraction) by *conceiving* separately objects that *can exist* separately, even if I have never experienced them apart from one another. I can for example imagine a human torso without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking of the rose itself. But my power of conceiving or imagining goes no further than that: it doesn't extend beyond the limits of what can actually exist or be perceived. Therefore, because I can't possibly *see or feel a thing* without having an actual sensation of it, I also can't possibly *conceive of a perceptible thing* distinct from the sensation or perception of it.

**6.** Some truths are so close to the mind, and so obvious, that as soon as you open your eyes you will see them. Here is an important truth of that kind:

All the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a mind; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known; consequently so long as they aren't actually

perceived by (i.e. don't exist in the mind of) myself or any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else exist in the mind of some eternal spirit; because it makes no sense—and involves all the absurdity of abstraction—to attribute to any such thing an existence independent of a spirit.

To be convinced of this, you need only to reflect and try to separate in your own thoughts the existence of a perceptible thing from its being perceived—you'll find that you can't.

**7.** From what I have said it follows that the only *substances* are *spirits*—things that perceive. Another argument for the same conclusion is the following down to the end of the section. The perceptible qualities are colour, shape, motion, smell, taste and so on, and these are ideas perceived by sense. Now it is plainly self-contradictory to suppose that an idea might exist in an unperceiving thing, for *to have an idea* is just the same as *to perceive*: so whatever *has* colour, shape and so on must *perceive* these qualities; from which it clearly follows that there can be no unthinking substance or substratum of those ideas.

**8.** 'But', you say, 'though the ideas don't exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, and *these* things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance.' I answer that *the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea*; a colour or shape can't be like anything but another colour or shape. Attend a little to your own thoughts and you will find that you can't conceive of any likeness except between your ideas. Also: tell me about those supposed originals or external things of which our ideas are the pictures or representations—are *they* perceivable or not? If they are, then they are ideas, and I have won the argument; but if you say they are not, I appeal to anyone whether it makes sense to assert that a colour

is like something that is invisible; that hard or soft is like something intangible; and similarly for the other qualities.

**9.** Some philosophers distinguish ‘primary qualities’ from ‘secondary’ qualities: they use the former term to stand for extension, shape, motion, rest, solidity and number; by the latter term they denote all other perceptible qualities, such as colours, sounds, tastes, and so on. Our ideas of secondary qualities don’t resemble anything existing outside the mind or unperceived, they admit; but they insist that our ideas of primary qualities are patterns or images of things that exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance that they call ‘matter’. By ‘matter’, therefore, we are to understand an inert, senseless substance in which extension, shape and motion actually exist. But I have already shown that extension, shape, and motion are quite clearly nothing but ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can’t be like anything but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor things from which they are copied can exist in an unperceiving substance. So the very notion of so-called ‘matter’, or corporeal substance, clearly involves a contradiction.

**10.** Those who assert that shape, motion and the other primary qualities exist outside the mind in unthinking substances say in the same breath that colours, sounds, heat, cold, and other secondary qualities do not. These, they tell us, are sensations that exist in the mind alone, and depend on the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. They offer this as an undoubted truth that they can prove conclusively. Now if it is certain that **(1)** primary qualities are inseparably united with secondary ones, and can’t be abstracted from them even in thought, it clearly follows that **(2)** primary qualities exist only in the mind, just as the secondary ones do. I now defend **(1)**. Look in on yourself, and see whether you can perform a mental

abstraction that enables you to conceive of a body’s being *extended* and *moving* without having any other perceptible qualities. Speaking for myself, I see quite clearly that I can’t form an idea of an extended, moving body unless I also give it some colour or other perceptible quality which is admitted by the philosophers I have been discussing to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, shape and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. It follows that these primary qualities must be where the secondary ones are—namely in the mind and nowhere else.

**11.** Here’s a further point about extension and motion. Large and small, and fast and slow, are generally agreed to exist only in the mind. That is because they are entirely relative: whether something is large or small, and whether it moves quickly or slowly, depends on the condition or location of the sense-organs of the perceiver. [See the end of **14** for a little light on the quick/slow part of this point.] So if there is extension outside the mind, it must be neither large nor small, and extra-mental motion must be neither fast nor slow. I conclude that there is no such extension or motion. (If you reply ‘They do exist; they are extension *in general* and motion *in general*’, that will be further evidence of how greatly the doctrine about extended, movable substances existing outside the mind depends on that strange theory of abstract ideas.) . . . So unthinking substances can’t be extended; and that implies that they can’t be solid either, because it makes no sense to suppose that something is solid but not extended.

**12.** Even if we grant that the other primary qualities exist outside the mind, it must be conceded that *number* is entirely created by the mind. This will be obvious to anyone who notices that the same thing can be assigned different numbers depending on how the mind views it. Thus, the