Berkeley’s Principles, published in 1710 when he was twenty-five years old and revised in 1734, is a wonderful, engaging, and sometimes frustrating work that articulates and defends a thesis that has been widely reviled at least in part because it has been widely misunderstood, namely, the claim (call it ‘idealism’) that sensible objects (tables and chairs, apples and pears) are no more than collections of ideas that can exist only in the minds that perceive them, and, more generally, the claim that the only things that exist in the universe are minds and their ideas. Berkeley originally intended the work to have two parts, with Part I devoted to his theory of mind and body and Part II devoted to the application of the principles announced in Part I to theology and morality (among other matters). Unfortunately for us, Berkeley lost the manuscript of Part II during his travels in Italy in 1716, and much later (in 1729) pithily wrote to his friend, the American philosopher Samuel Johnson, that he ‘never had leisure since to do so disagreeable a thing as writing twice on the same subject’ (Works 2: 282). Those who are interested in what Berkeley might have included in Part II should consult Alciphron (1732) and Siris (1744).

The Principles consists of an Introduction, followed by 156 numbered sections that Berkeley himself indicates should be divided into three parts, with P 1-33 devoted to metaphysics (the theory of what exists) and epistemology (the theory of what is and can be known about what exists), P 34-84 (aside from an extended digression at P 67-81)
devoted to answering objections to his theory, and P 85-156 devoted to drawing out the consequences and advantages of his theory.

[A] Introduction: Against the Doctrine of Abstraction

Among Berkeley’s predecessors, skeptics such as Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), picking up on the work of Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160-210), had argued that there are good reasons for us not to trust our senses, and John Locke (1632-1704) had claimed in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689) that we should ‘sit down in a quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities’ (I.i.4), including the nature or essence of physical things. In the Published Introduction to the Principles (itself divided into 25 sections), Berkeley claims that we have a strong desire for knowledge, that surely God (assuming he exists) would not have given us such a strong desire if he had made it impossible or very difficult for us to know much of anything about the world, and that ‘the high-road of plain, common sense’ is right to suppose that we should believe the evidence of our senses (PI 1-3). Berkeley spends much of the rest of the Introduction attacking the one doctrine that he finds ‘to have occasioned innumerable errors and difficulties in almost all parts of knowledge’, namely, that ‘the mind hath a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things’ (PI 6). If we rid ourselves of the Doctrine of Abstraction, says Berkeley, we will be better able to understand what the world is really like and what can be known about it.

The Doctrine of Abstraction is the view that among ideas, i.e., those entities immediately perceived by means of the senses or the imagination, some are by their very nature general, applying to many things at once. By contrast, Berkeley insists that all
existing entities, including ideas, are intrinsically particular. As Berkeley sees it, his predecessors (notably Locke) take themselves to have discovered two ways of forming abstract ideas: what we might call ‘singling’ abstraction and ‘generalizing’ abstraction. By singling abstraction, we mentally separate one idea from others with which it is united in our experience. This is supposed to happen, for example, when we mentally separate color from extension. By generalizing abstraction, we mentally separate one idea from its particular determinations, as when we think of a color but no particular color. Berkeley’s main argument against ideas formed by singling abstraction is that it is impossible to ‘conceive separately those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated’: for example, if no sensible object can exist unperceived, then it is impossible to mentally separate the idea of a sensible object from the idea of its being perceived. His main argument against ideas formed by generalizing abstraction (but also against some ideas formed by singling abstraction, as when color is supposedly mentally separated from extension) is that he ‘cannot by any effort of thought conceive’ them: for example, ‘whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and colour’ (PI 10).

Exactly how Berkeley supposes the Doctrine of Abstraction to be responsible for errors that have driven philosophers to skepticism is something that he discusses here and there in the main text of the Principles, and is something we will come back to.

[A] Main Text

P 1-33 divides naturally into four parts. In P 1-7, Berkeley argues that all sensible objects (such as tables and chairs, as well as their sensible qualities, such as color and shape) are ideas or collections of ideas, and that the only things in the worlds are minds and ideas.
In P 8-21, Berkeley argues that materialism, the thesis that the world contains material substances, is necessarily false because the very concept of material substance is incoherent, that the Doctrine of Abstraction is at fault for making materialism seem philosophically palatable, and that materialism leads naturally to skepticism, as well as ‘numberless controversies and disputes’ in both philosophy (including natural philosophy, i.e., science) and religion. In P 22-23, Berkeley attempts what appears (erroneously, I believe) to be a self-standing argument (often called the ‘Master Argument’) for idealism. And, following a paragraph (P 24) summarizing the result of his anti-materialist arguments, Berkeley devotes P 25-33 to an argument for the existence of God.

[B] Sections 1-7: The Proof of Idealism
Berkeley tries three ways of establishing idealism in P 1-7. In P 1, he claims that sensible things (such as apples) are combinations or collections of sensible qualities (such as color, taste, smell, shape, and texture) and, presupposing that such qualities are just ideas, concludes that all the ‘objects of human knowledge are…ideas’. In P 3, he argues that idealism follows from the proper understanding of the meaning of the word ‘exists’. For, he argues, to say that a table exists when one is in its presence is to say that one perceives it (by sight or touch), and to say that a table exists when one is not in its presence is to say either that if one were in its presence one might perceive it or that some other mind perceives it (even while one is not oneself perceiving it). He concludes that the esse (or being) of sensible things (such as tables) is percipi (to be perceived), and hence that sensible things must be ideas. In P 4, he argues that sensible things (by definition) are
‘the things we perceive by sense’, that we do not perceive anything ‘besides our own ideas or sensations’, and hence that sensible things are no more than ideas or sensations.

Each of these arguments is problematic, in ways that Berkeley almost certainly came to recognize. (It is worth remembering that Berkeley wrote the Principles when still a very young man.) Concerning the first argument, it is far from obvious that apples, say, are just collections of qualities. Berkeley’s opponents (including the followers of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), René Descartes (1596-1650), or Locke) would have said that apples are substances, things that have qualities, things in which qualities inhere. In addition, it is far from obvious that sensible qualities themselves (color, shape, and so on) are nothing but ideas, that they cannot exist unperceived. Interestingly, in the first of his Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous (1713), published three years after the Principles and designed to ‘treat more clearly and fully of certain principles laid down in [the Principles], and to place them in a new light’ (3D: 167-68), Berkeley tries to solve this problem by providing explicit arguments for both of the premises of the argument in P 1, arguments that also underpin acceptance of the premises of the argument in P 4. As for the argument from P 3, Berkeley drops it and never once returns to it.

Berkeley recognizes, of course, that hardly any of his predecessors accepts idealism. But he diagnoses this philosophical mistake as the product of unjustified adherence to the Doctrine of Abstraction (P 5). Acceptance of the possibility of singling abstraction suggests the possibility of mentally separating the idea of the existence of a sensible object from the idea of its being perceived. But Berkeley accepts that if the idea of X can be mentally separated from the idea of Y, then X and Y can exist apart from Y in reality. So if the idea of a sensible object’s existing were mentally separable from the
idea of its being perceived, then it would be possible in reality for a sensible object to exist unperceived, and hence idealism would be false. But if, as Berkeley has already argued in the Introduction, the Doctrine of Abstraction is false, then it can provide no reason for thinking that idealism is false.

In P 2, Berkeley argues that the existence of ideas entails the existence of ‘something which knows or perceives them’, namely minds (spirits, souls, selves). Given that he takes himself to have shown by P 4 that the entire sensible world is a world of ideas, that minds are substances (things that can exist independently of anything else, except perhaps for God) but ideas are not (because they depend for their existence on minds), and that the only possible substances must be either minds or among the things that minds perceive by sense, it follows directly that ‘there is not any other substance that spirit, or that which perceives’ (P 7). (This is a kind of substance-monism, the view that there is only one kind of substance. This view should be contrasted with Descartes’s substance-dualism, according to which there are two fundamentally different kinds of substances, (inmaterial) minds and (material) bodies.) And if the only existing things are minds, ideas, and the things perceived by minds, it follows from idealism (the thesis that the things perceived by minds are ideas) that the only existing things are minds and ideas.

[B] Sections 8-21: Against Materialism

In P 8-21, Berkeley criticizes the claim that the world contains material substances distinct from minds and their ideas. Berkeley’s targets are philosophers such as Locke, who hold that some ideas (namely, ideas of primary qualities, such as shape, size, and motion) resemble qualities existing in or supported by an unthinking (material) substance,
as well as philosophers such as Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), who hold in addition that secondary qualities (such as color, sound, taste, odor, cold, and hot) are themselves ideas existing only in minds. Against the former, Berkeley insists on what has come to be known as the Likeness Principle, the claim that ‘an idea can be like nothing but an idea’ (P 8). It follows from this principle that if ideas of primary qualities resemble the qualities they represent, then those qualities must themselves be ideas, and hence cannot exist in an unthinking substance. Against the latter, Berkeley wields his denial of the Doctrine of Abstraction, holding that primary qualities are mentally inseparable from second qualities (so that, for example, it is impossible to conceive shape without color). Given that the mental inseparability of qualities entails their inseparability in reality, Berkeley concludes that if secondary qualities exist only in minds, then primary qualities must exist only in minds too; thus, there is no reason to suppose that there is any unthinking substance external to the mind serving as a support to sensible qualities (P 10 and P 14-15).

Besides, argues Berkeley, the very concept of material substance is self-contradictory. For a material substance, by definition, is supposed to be an unthinking support of sensible qualities. But from the truth of idealism, which Berkeley takes himself to have already established in P 1-4, it follows that sensible qualities are ideas. And the only kind of thing capable of supporting an idea is a mind, or thinking thing. Hence, if material substances were unthinking supports of sensible qualities, it would follow that material substances are both unthinking and thinking (P 9). In addition, even leaving aside the truth of idealism, the claim that a material substance supports sensible qualities cannot be taken literally (‘as when we say that pillars support a building’—P 16),
and yet the non-literal way in which matter is supposed to serve as a support to sensible qualities is left unexplained. And if, as Locke suggests, the idea of material substance contains ‘the idea of being in general’ (in addition to the idea of supporting sensible qualities), then the idea of matter is abstract, and hence, as Berkeley has already argued in the Introduction, incomprehensible, indeed impossible (P 17).

Furthermore, argues Berkeley, even if the idea of material substance were coherent and even if there actually were mind-independent material substances, it would be impossible for us to know of their existence. For knowledge must be grounded in either sense or reason. But the information sensation provides is limited to the entities immediately perceived by sense, namely ideas; hence, sensation on its own cannot provide us with any information about supposed material substances. And given that there is no necessary connection between ideas and material substances, that for all we know it would be possible for us (as in the case of a comprehensive hallucination) to have all the ideas we have now in the absence of any material substances, it follows that reason does not entitle us to infer the existence of material substance from the existence of the ideas we experience in sensation. Given that all knowledge is grounded in either sense or reason, it follows that we cannot know that material substances exist even if they do. Materialism, then, even if coherent, unavoidably leads to skepticism about the sensible world (P 18-20). By contrast, of course, if sensible objects are nothing but immediately perceived collections of ideas of sense, then, given that we can and do know (and indeed, know the very nature of) the objects of immediate perception, it follows from idealism that knowledge of the sensible world and of its nature is not only possible, but also actual. Idealism, then, unlike materialism, endorses the deliverances of common sense (for
example, that there really is a hand in front of me as I type) and avoids the scourge of skepticism.

[B] Sections 22-24: The Master Argument

The Master Argument of P 22-23 is a response to a challenge to idealism that Berkeley imagines materialists might use in their own defense. The challenge is that it seems possible (indeed, easy) ‘to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no body by to perceive them’ (P 23). But if this is possible, then given that what is conceivable is possible, it follows that it is possible for trees in a park and closeted books to exist unperceived. Yet, if idealism were true, then such trees and books would be ideas, and since the very esse of an idea is percipi (P 3), they could not exist unperceived. Berkeley attempts to meet the challenge by arguing that, despite appearances, it is actually impossible to imagine any physical object (such as a tree or a book) existing unperceived. Different scholars have offered different reconstructions of Berkeley’s argument here, the vast majority of the opinion that it is grossly fallacious. My own view is that it is a mistake to treat the argument as invalid, and that this mistake derives from the (understandable, but also mistaken) view (rashly suggested by Berkeley’s comment that he is ‘content to put the whole upon this issue’ (P 22)) that the argument is meant to be free-standing and independent of the argument for idealism in P 1 and P 4. Once it is recognized that the Master Argument assumes the truth of one of the premises used to establish idealism in these sections (namely, the assumption that everything conceived by the mind is an idea), it can be seen as valid, but also secondary
in importance to the arguments of P 1-4, if only because it is not (as is widely assumed) an argument for idealism at all.


Berkeley’s argument for God’s existence in the Principles starts from the assumption, based on mere introspection of our ideas as purely passive and inert, that ‘all our ideas…are visibly inactive,…so that one idea…cannot produce, or make any alteration in another’ (P 25). It follows that extension, shape, and (most importantly) motion, having been shown in P 1-4 to be ideas themselves, cannot be the cause of anything, and hence cannot be the cause of our ideas. Yet where there is change, there must be a cause of change. Given that our ideas are constantly changing, it follows that something must be the cause of our ideas. That cause cannot itself be an idea. But since there are in the world only substances and ideas, it follows that the cause of our ideas must be a substance. And since there can be no such thing as material substance, the cause of our ideas must be ‘an incorporeal active substance or spirit’ (P 26). However, although I am able to imagine new ideas (such as the idea of a centaur) at will, ideas of sense, unlike ideas of imagination, are not subject to my will: if my eyes are open and in working order, I cannot help but see hands on the keyboard in front of me even if I will not to perceive them. Thus, although my mind may be the cause of my ideas of imagination, some other mind must be the cause of my ideas of sensation (P 28-29). But my ideas of sensation exhibit a remarkable ‘steadiness, order, and coherence’, as well as admirability. Given that only a mind of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness could cause an immense set of interconnected beautiful ideas of such remarkable coherence and complexity, it follows
that our ideas of sense are caused by such a mind, that is, it follows that our ideas of
sense are caused by God (P 30-33—see also P 146). This argument for God’s existence
is therefore a combination of features found in standard cosmological and teleological
arguments, with a serious idealist twist.

[B] Sections 34-84: Objections and Replies

In P 34-84, Berkeley anticipates and responds to a significant number of objections to his
idealist metaphysics and epistemology. Berkeley numbers these objections (with the
same objection often taking up several consecutive sections), but sometimes includes two
separate objections under the same number, and sometimes counts as an objection
something that is not. The numbered list below reflects the logic of Berkeley’s
argumentation, rather than his explicit numbering.

The first objection Berkeley considers is that idealism entails the unpalatable
consequence that physical objects, being nothing but collections of ideas, are not real but
rather just ‘so many chimeras and illusions’ (P 34). By contrast, it might be alleged,
materialism can make sense of the distinction between reality and illusion by treating
reality as mind-independence while treating illusoriness as mind-dependence. Berkeley’s
answer is that there is a very simple way of distinguishing between real and chimerical
objects within his idealist metaphysics: an idea or collection of ideas counts as real
inasmuch as it is ‘affecting, orderly, and distinct’, while an idea or collection of ideas
counts as chimerical inasmuch as it is ‘faint, weak, and unsteady’ (P 36). This account of
the distinction, as Berkeley emphasizes, preserves the commonsense belief that sensible
objects (such as the sun, and in general ‘every part of the mundane system’) are real, while all imagined objects (such as centaurs and fictional characters) are chimerical.

A second objection charges that ‘it sounds very harsh to say’, as Berkeley’s idealism avers, that ‘we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas’ (P 38). In response, Berkeley acknowledges the point, but attributes the harshness to the fact that the word ‘idea’ is not commonly used to refer to combinations of sensible qualities. Once it is recognized, as the arguments of P 1-4 presuppose, that sensible qualities are nothing but ideas and that sensible objects such as food, drink, and clothing are nothing but combinations of sensible qualities, the truth, even if not the propriety, of the claim that ‘we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas’ becomes manifest. Moreover, Berkeley maintains, the word ‘idea’ as he uses it means no more than ‘immediate object of (sense) perception’. So on this usage of the word ‘idea’, to say that we eat and drink ideas is to say no more than that we eat and drink things that are immediately perceived (by sense). And this is hardly a harsh statement that is grating to the common or philosophical ear (P 38).

It should be noted that while the first point (relying on the distinction between the truth and the propriety of assertoric speech) is reasonable, the second is one that seems inconsistent with Berkeley’s approach to the establishment of idealism in the first of the Three Dialogues. For in the first Dialogue, Berkeley’s spokesman, Philonous, argues for idealism on the strength of four assumptions: (i) that sensible objects are perceived by sense, (ii) that everything that is perceived by sense is immediately perceived, (iii) that everything that is immediately perceived by sense is a sensible quality or collection of sensible qualities, and (iv) that all sensible qualities are ideas. But if the word ‘idea’, as
Berkeley suggests at P 38, is just synonymous with the phrase ‘immediate object of (sense) perception’, then idealism would follow directly from (i) and (ii), and both (iii) and (iv) would be otiose. Given that the first Dialogue treats both (iii) and (iv) as critical premises in the argument for idealism, Berkeley must be assuming there that the claim that the immediate objects of (sense) perception are ideas is a substantive, rather than a tautological, proposition.

A third objection to idealism is that whereas ideas, being in our minds, are ‘near to us’, many sensible things (such as houses and trees) are seen as being ‘at a distance from us’. In response, Berkeley makes two points. The first, very reasonable observation is that ‘in a dream we do oft perceive things as existing at a great distance off, and yet for all that, those things are acknowledged to have their existence only in the mind’ (P 42). Berkeley here notices that the proposition that sensible things are seen as being at a distance does not entail the proposition that sensible things are at a distance. The second point relies on arguments Berkeley had just published in An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision (1709), and to which he refers the reader. There he argues that seeing something as being at a distance is a matter of learning from experience which ‘ideas of touch will be imprinted on our minds’ after the perception of completely heterogeneous ideas of sight and the excitation of ‘this or that motion in our own bodies’ (P 44). For example, as Berkeley might say, to see a computer screen as being at some distance from me is to know that I will perceive ideas of tangible flatness and uniform resistance when I experience the kinesthetic sensation of extending my hand in a particular direction. In support of this hypothesis, Berkeley notes that ‘a man born blind, and afterwards made to see, would not, at first sight, think the things he saw, to be without his mind, or at any
distance from him’ (P 43). If Berkeley is right about what seeing something as being at a distance amounts to (namely, predicting which ideas of touch will follow upon which ideas of sight under such-and-such conditions), then seeing a tree, say, as being at some distance from me is perfectly compatible with the tree’s being no more than a collection of ideas in my mind.

A fourth objection is that idealism entails the unacceptable consequence that sensible things ‘are every moment annihilated and created anew’. For if sensible things (such as the laptop screen I see) are nothing but collections of ideas, then they cease to exist when they are not perceived. And this means that ‘upon shutting my eyes [the screen] is reduced to nothing, and barely upon opening them it is again created’ (P 45). After some ad hominem attacks (in P 46-47) on some of his intellectual opponents for being forced to accept the same result as applied to some sensible things (such as light and colors), Berkeley answers the objection straightforwardly. The fact that I do not perceive the laptop screen when my eyes are closed does not entail that the screen has ceased to be, for it might well be that the screen is being perceived by another mind (P 48). Indeed, if, as Berkeley argues in the second of the Three Dialogues, all sensible things are perceived by God, then there is no doubt that the screen continues to exist even when it is unperceived by any finite mind.

A fifth objection, which relies on Scholastic metaphysical assumptions, is that ‘if [as idealists aver] extension and figure [i.e., shape] exist only in the mind, it follows that the mind is extended and figured’. But, as Berkeley himself accepts, it is absurd to suppose that the mind is extended or figured. Hence, it is absurd to suppose that extension and figure are nothing but ideas in the mind. The Scholastics (and also
Cartesians) argue for the first premise of this objection as follows: (i) extension is an attribute (roughly, a way for a substance to be that is essential to it) and shape is a mode (roughly, a way for a substance to be that is not essential to it), (ii) whenever an attribute or mode exists in a substance, it is predicated of that substance, (iii) to predicate F-ness of X is to say that X is F (e.g., to predicate strength of Socrates is to say that Socrates is strong); therefore (iv) if extension and figure exist in the mind, then the mind is extended and figured (P 49).

In response, Berkeley attacks premises (i) and (ii), urging that ‘what philosophers say of subject and mode…seems very groundless and unintelligible’. Extension and shape are not ways for a body to be; rather, they are constituents of, or compose, bodies. For, as P 1-4 have already established, a body is no more than a collection of ideas such as extension and shape. Extension and shape, therefore, are parts or constituents of bodies, rather than modes or attributes of bodies. Moreover, extension and shape are not ways for a mind to be, and so predicatable of it, even when they exist in it. For extension and shape are ideas, ideas exist in minds only by being perceived by those minds, and the mere fact that X perceives Y does not entail that Y is predicatable of X.

A sixth objection is that ‘whatever advances have been made…in the study of Nature…do all proceed on the supposition, that…matter doth really exist’ (P 50). So if, as idealists claim, there is and can be no such thing as matter or material substance, then they must abjure the remarkably successful corpuscularian mechanism at the heart of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Berkeley’s response to this objection is clear and straightforward: whatever phenomena can be explained on the supposition of corpuscularian mechanism can just as easily be explained on the basis of an idealist
metaphysics. For scientific explanation, Berkeley claims, is no more than showing ‘why upon such and such occasions we are affected with such and such ideas’. For example, it might be argued that it is a law of nature that a heated gas expands. To Berkeley, this simply means that perception of the idea of heat and, say, the idea of a balloon filled with gas is invariably attended with perception of the balloon’s expansion. As long as every corpuscularian mechanistic explanation can be successfully recast as the generalization of an ideational sequence, idealists do no worse than materialists in accounting for the results of scientific observation and experiment.

A seventh objection is that idealism subverts our ordinary suppositions about causation. For example, we ordinarily say that ‘fire heats’ and ‘water cools’. But, strictly speaking, if idealism is true, then fire is one collection of ideas, and water another. Given that ideas, being inert and passive, are incapable of causing anything (P 25), it follows that fire cannot be the cause of heat and water cannot be the cause of cold. If spirits are the only active beings, then we must say instead that ‘a spirit heats, and so forth’. These results seem absurd on their face: surely it is the fire (not a mind) that does the heating and the water (not a mind) that does the cooling (P 51).

Berkeley’s famous response is that ‘in such things [i.e., talk of what causes what] we ought to think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar [i.e., with the common folk]’ (P 51). Just as there is no harm in saying that the sun rises even though (on the Copernican hypothesis) it does not actually rise, so there is no harm in saying that fire heats or water cools even though it is acknowledged that, strictly speaking, only a spirit can heat or cool anything. The use of language is best suited to the ends of life, so if it advances our ends to speak as if sensible objects are causes, then such talk is appropriate
even if it is false (P 52). Besides, argues Berkeley, idealism is superior to alternative occasionalist materialist systems, such as the theory of Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), that agree with idealism in robbing sensible objects of causal power. For occasionalist materialism must suppose that God has created a number of material substances to no purpose, given that it would have been just as easy for him to have produced directly what those material substances are held to occasion (P 53).

An eighth objection is that the existence of matter is almost universally accepted, and it seems wrongheaded to suppose that so many people could be so wrong about this. In response, Berkeley makes two points. First, he argues that this would not be the only time that a vast number of people had accepted something that, properly considered, is meaningless or self-contradictory (P 54): witness the almost universal acceptance of the metaphysics of subject, mode, and attribute for hundreds of years in the Schools. Second, he points out, quite reasonably, that universal acceptance of a proposition ‘is but a weak argument of its truth’, especially given the ‘vast number of prejudices and false opinions…every where embraced with the utmost tenaciousness, by the unreflecting (which are the far greater) part of mankind’. For example, the proposition that the earth moves has been rejected by almost everyone who ever considered the matter, and yet the proposition is almost surely false (P 55). Berkeley goes on to explain how it might have come about that so many people take the world to contain material substances. People recognize, rightly, that their ideas of sense must be caused by something outside their minds. They then infer, wrongly, that the cause of their ideas must be material things that resemble their ideas, in part because their experience is so uniform that it does not lead them to think that their ideas are caused by someone’s will, and in part because the real
cause of their ideas (namely, God) is not singled out in their experience ‘by any particular finite collection of sensible ideas’ (P 56-57).

A ninth objection is that idealism is incompatible with the truths of science and mathematics. For idealism entails that whatever is not perceived does not exist; so, for example, if the motion of the Earth is not perceived, then the Earth does not move; and hence, given that we do not perceive the Earth to move, it follows that the Earth is at rest. But this result contradicts the best astronomical theory. Berkeley claims in reply that to say that the Earth moves is to assert a counterfactual conditional of the following sort: ‘if we were placed in such-and-such circumstances, we would perceive the Earth to move’. And the truth of this counterfactual conditional is perfectly consistent with the result of conjoining idealism with the fact that we do not perceive the Earth’s motion.

A tenth objection is that if, as Berkeley holds, God is the cause of all motion and other natural effects in the universe, what reason could he have had to create ‘an innumerable multitude of bodies and machines framed with the most exquisite art...which serve to explain abundance of phenomena’, when he could have produced the same effects directly? If no such reason can be found, then idealism entails that God acts without a purpose, a result that contradicts God’s providence. In reply, Berkeley insists (at P 62) that the vast and intricate assemblage of interconnected natural machinery is needed to produce effects in accordance with the laws of nature (rules that specify which ideas are regularly followed by which other ideas—P 30), laws that themselves make it possible for us ‘to regulate our actions for the benefit of life’ (P 31). There is therefore a relatively straightforward connection between God’s providence and his decision to create such a ‘wonderfully fine and subtle’ ‘clockwork of Nature’ (P 60).
At this point in the *Principles*, Berkeley engages in an extended digression (P 67-81) on the question of whether there might not be a way to save materialism from the objections leveled at the doctrine at P 8-21. Berkeley imagines the materialist retreating, first to the claim that matter is an ‘inert senseless substance, that exists without the mind, which is the occasion of our ideas, or at the presence whereof God is pleased to excite ideas in us’ (P 67), and second to the claim that matter is ‘an unknown somewhat, neither substance nor accident, spirit nor idea, inert, thoughtless, indivisible, immovable, unextended, existing in no place’ (P 80), but still something describable as a ‘quiddity, entity, or existence’ (P 81). In response, Berkeley provides further criticisms of the occasionalism presupposed by the first line of retreat, and ridicules the second line of retreat as involving the reduction of the idea of matter to the idea of nothingness, given that the positive ideas of quiddity, entity, and existence (in general) are purportedly abstract ideas that are, in actual fact, inconceivable and impossible (see PI). (In the first of the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley collects the objections to materialism that exist separately at P 8-21 and P 67-81 into a single sustained anti-materialist argument.)

The eleventh and final objection Berkeley considers is that idealism is incompatible with Scriptural reports that real sensible objects exist and that miracles (such as the changing of water into wine) have taken place (P 82). Berkeley makes short work of this objection, pointing out that idealism is fully compatible with (indeed, entails) the claim that real sensible objects exist, and with the claim that Jesus transformed water into wine. After all, idealism entails that sensible objects are collections of ideas, and given that these ideas exist, it follows that sensible objects exist. And, according to idealism, to say that Jesus changed water into wine is to say that Jesus
replaced one collection of idea with another collection of ideas. Moreover, the water that Jesus changed, as well as the wine into which Jesus changed it, were both very real, inasmuch as the ideas of which they were composed were affecting, orderly, and distinct (see P 34-36).

The rest of the Principles is devoted to discussion of the advantages and consequences of idealism, considered relative to its major opponent, materialism. Berkeley divides his discussion into two main parts, each devoted to one of the two kinds of beings he takes to exist: ideas (P 85-134) and spirits (P 135-156). He begins the first part by pointing out two general advantages of idealism over materialism, one philosophical and the other theological: (i) that the former is inconsistent with, while the latter naturally leads to, skepticism about the existence and nature of sensible objects (P 85-91), and (ii) that the former avoids the atheism, idolatry, and Christian heresies that are natural outgrowths of the latter (P 92-96). He then moves on to the advantages of idealism over materialism with respect to the theory of ideas and sensible objects in the realms of science (P 97-99, 101-117), morals (P 100), arithmetic (P 118-122), and geometry (P 123-132), followed by a brief summary (P 133-134) of the main points argued for in P 85-132. In the second part (P 135-156), Berkeley also divides his discussion in two, first focusing on knowledge of the existence of finite spirits (P 135-145), and then addressing knowledge of the existence of the only infinite spirit, namely, God (P 146-156).

[B] Sections 85-91: Philosophical Advantages, and Restatement, of Idealism
Materialism, as Berkeley reminds us, is beset with problems for which its adherents struggled to find solutions: ‘Whether corporeal substances can think? Whether matter be infinitely divisible? And how it operates on spirit?’ (P 85). Locke answers the first question positively, while Descartes answers it negatively. Descartes answers the second question positively, while Epicureans (such as Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655)) answer it negatively. And while materialist monists (such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and staunch Epicureans) explain the operation of body on spirit (and vice versa) as involving the transfer of motion from one material substance to another, materialist dualists (including Descartes and Locke) throw up their hands when asked (as Descartes was asked by Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia (1630-1714)) to explain how an immaterial substance and a material substance are supposed to causally interact. As Berkeley emphasizes, idealism avoids all of these disturbing questions and debates inasmuch as it entails the non-existence, indeed, the impossibility, of matter (P 85—see P 9).

In the next few sections (P 86-88), Berkeley repeats the arguments of P 18-20 that materialism leads to skepticism. If material objects existing outside our minds can stay the same while our ideas of them vary, if it is possible for us to have ideas of material objects (as in dreams and hallucinations) that are not really there to be perceived, then it possible for our senses to mislead us and, beyond that, it becomes impossible for us to know whether our ideas really conform to an external reality or even whether there is an external reality for our ideas to conform to (P 86-87). Besides, materialism also leads to a distrust of common sense, which teaches us to place total faith in our senses, and thereby ‘makes philosophy ridiculous in the eyes of the world’ (P 88). By contrast, of course, idealism, which teaches that sensible things are nothing more than ideas or
collections thereof, entails that sensible things, like all ideas in our minds, are perfectly known, both as to their existence and as to their intrinsic properties.

Berkeley then ends his discussion of the philosophical advantages of idealism over materialism by restating the main tenets of idealism (P 89-91): that there are two distinct kinds of things or beings, namely, spirits and ideas (see P 1-2); that the former are active, enduring, indivisible, and independent beings (see P 27), while the latter are inert, fleeting, divisible, and dependent beings (see P 25); that there are, in addition to things, relations and actions; that we know of our own existence ‘by inward feeling or reflexion’ and of the existence of other spirits ‘by reason’, i.e., by inferring their existence from the signs of their operations or from the ideas they produce in our minds (see P 145); that ‘an idea can be like nothing but an idea’ (see P 8), and hence that our ideas cannot resemble anything existing outside of all minds; that our ideas of sense are produced in us by another spirit in which they themselves exist (namely, God—see P 29-31), and in this way may be called ‘external’; and that even though sensible things are ideas or collections thereof, the fact that they depend on minds for their existence does not derogate from their reality (P 33-36).

[B] Sections 92-96: Theological Advantages of Idealism

In these sections, Berkeley argues that materialism, unlike idealism, conduces to atheism. For first, some materialists think that because nothing comes from nothing, God could not have created matter from nothing, and therefore matter must be ‘uncreated and coeternal with him’ (P 92). This contradicts the idea that God created the universe and that he is the only eternal, necessary being. Second, monistic materialists hold that
because spirits are material and all material substances are divisible, spirits themselves must be divisible, and therefore ‘subject to corruption as the body’, i.e., naturally mortal. Third, materialists (such as ‘Epicureans, Hobbists, and the like’) who take matter (a ‘self-existent, stupid, unthinking substance’) to be at the origin of life must deny the existence of any sort of providence or ‘inspection of a superior mind over the affairs of the world’ (P 93). By contrast, Berkeley holds, idealism does not conflict with the basic tenets of Christian theology. For idealists are not plagued by any worry about how matter could have been created, given that they deny the existence and possibility of matter; they hold that the mind is immaterial and indivisible, and thus incorruptible and naturally immortal (P 141); and the argument for God’s existence (at P 25-33) entails that God supervises the created universe with wisdom and benevolence.

Berkeley also notes that materialism provides support for idolatry, i.e., the worship of sensible beings (such as ‘the sun, moon, and stars’), particularly if these things are thought to be the source or support of human life. By contrast, idealism tells us that sensible beings are nothing but collections of ideas in our minds created in us by God. Given that ideas are fleeting, dependent beings and that there is no pre-existing disposition to worship beings of this kind, idealism does not conduce to idolatry, but conduces rather to the worship of the cause of such a wondrous system of ideas, namely, God (P 94).

Finally, Berkeley argues that materialism is difficult to reconcile with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body after death, and also (in ways that Berkeley does not explain) conduces to Socinianism (a system of Christian heresies, including the denial of Christ’s full divinity, the denial of natural immortality, and the
denial of the Trinity—three persons in one substance). For, in particular, if the human body is a material substance composed of matter that is scattered after death, possibly entering other human bodies, then it is difficult to understand how all of the matter composing a human body immediately before death could be collected to reshape it after death. By contrast, if, as idealism holds, the human body is nothing but a collection of ideas, then it becomes easy to understand how the very same body that existed in the mind of God before death could exist in the mind of God after death (P 95).

[B] Sections 97-117: Advantages of Idealism in Science and Morals
Berkeley begins this part of the Principles by outlining the felicitous consequences of his denial of the Doctrine of Abstraction. He charges that this doctrine is responsible for numerous ‘difficulties’ (P 98) and ‘great extravagancies’ (P 99). In particular, Berkeley argues, the attempt to abstract the idea of time from the idea of a succession of ideas in our minds (something impossible, because what time is is the succession of ideas in our minds) leads to the natural but wrongheaded thought, famously articulated by Augustine of Hippo (354-430), that the nature of time is inexplicable (P 97). Other difficulties ensue if it is held, as many proponents of abstraction do, that time, extension, and motion are infinitely divisible (P 98-99). (We may presume here that Berkeley is thinking of Zeno’s paradoxes.) As for morality, Berkeley claims that the misguided attempt to form and analyze abstract ideas of happiness, goodness, justice, and virtue (as in the work of Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke) has made it more difficult to inculcate morality and has resulted in the befuddling of moralists, who, we may presume, would be better served
studying concrete examples of moral behavior, such as Christ’s actions as described in the New Testament (P 100).

Berkeley now turns to more particular difficulties faced by materialists who want to make room for science. In his Essay, Locke writes that humans are incapable of scientific knowledge, in large part because the real internal constitution of any material substance (i.e., the primary qualities of the substance’s insensible parts that account for all of its observable properties) is beyond the ken of human beings. Berkeley picks up on this, noting that for the Lockean materialist ‘the internal qualities, and constitution of every the meanest object, is hid from our view’ (P 101). But whereas materialism cannot in fact make room for scientific knowledge, idealism can: for idealist science tells us that sensible things are all ideas, things that are in their very nature transparent to the human mind, and that the laws of nature are no more than the rules in accordance with which God excites ideas in our minds, rules that can be discovered by observation and experiment. Berkeley goes on to say that while mechanist materialists in particular struggle to explain how the motion of (insensible) matter causes the observable properties of sensible things, idealists who claim that motion is an idea (and hence, inactive) avoid the difficulty altogether (P 102).

Berkeley recognizes that some materialists, such as Isaac Newton (1642-1727), strive to explain the motion of some bodies (such as the tides and the fact that unsupported objects fall to earth), as well as the cohesion of their parts, by postulating a universal law of attraction or gravitation. But this hypothesis faces two major problems. The first is that the law of attraction does not so much explain as simply redescribe the motion of bodies (P 103). The second is that attraction is not in fact a universal
phenomenon: as counterexamples to the purported law, Berkeley cites three observations: the immobility of ‘the fixed stars’, ‘the perpendicular growth of plants’, and ‘the elasticity of the air’ (P 106).

Setting himself against the popular research program of corpuscularian mechanism, Berkeley insists that science should treat phenomena as signs, rather than as causes, of other phenomena, signs that God uses to inform us of what will be beneficial and what will be harmful to us. Properly conceived, then, science should investigate final causes, that is, the reasons or purposes lying behind God’s decision to cause the ideas he does, rather than the efficient causes hypothesized by materialists (P 107-109).

Berkeley then completes his account of the relative advantages of idealism by outlining (in P 110-117) some of the problems faced by the theory that Newton had advanced in his Principia, the Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy, published in 1687. The theory of the Principia assumes the existence of absolute space, absolute place (position in absolute space), and absolute motion (motion of a body from one absolute place to another), as well as absolute time (already discussed under the rubric of the abstract idea of time at P 97-98). But, so Berkeley argues, the ideas of absolute motion and place, if abstracted from ideas of relative motion and place, are, like all abstract ideas, incomprehensible and impossible (P 114), as is the idea of absolute space ‘exclusive of all body’ (P 116). Here, then, is yet another place in which the Doctrine of Abstraction leads even the most gifted scientific investigators into a conceptual morass from which their theories cannot be extricated.

[B] Sections 118-134: Advantages of Idealism in Arithmetic and Geometry
Turning now to mathematics, Berkeley explains some of the relative advantages of idealism over materialism, first in arithmetic, the study of number (P 118-122), and then in geometry, the study of extension (P 123-132). The main problems arising in arithmetic derive from the Doctrine of Abstraction, which leads mathematicians (and philosophers, such as Locke) to believe that it is possible to abstract the idea of unity from any particular idea or collection of ideas, and thence form abstract ideas of numbers greater than one by repeating the idea of unity. But, of course, as Berkeley has already argued (see PI and P 13), the Doctrine of Abstraction is false and the purported abstract idea of unity necessarily non-existent (P 119-120). As Berkeley then goes on to argue, arithmetic is a language composed of names that are used to signify particular things or groups of things, a language whose usefulness derives from the rules of computation with numerals and other arithmetical notation that enable us to derive practical results that ‘direct us how to act with relation to things, and dispose rightly of them’ (P 121-122).

In the case of geometry, the main problem arises from a supposition that is surprisingly neither an axiom nor a theorem of the Euclidean system, namely that finite extension is infinitely divisible. This supposition, as Berkeley has already argued in P 98-99, leads to what he here refers to as ‘amusing geometrical paradoxes, which have such a direct repugnancy to the plain common sense of mankind’, such as the Zenonian argument that it is impossible for an arrow to cover a finite distance in a finite period of time (P 123). What, then, accounts for the problematic supposition? Berkeley gives a twofold explanation. First, he charges that those who think they can construct an abstract, rarified idea of extension ‘may be persuaded’ of a finite extension’s infinite divisibility. Second, he charges that corpuscularian materialists may ‘be brought to admit’ that any
given finite length has infinitely many parts ‘too small to be discerned’ (P 125). This provides Berkeley with yet another reason to characterize the effects of abstractionism and materialism on the seemingly well-founded discipline of geometry as intellectually pernicious.

Berkeley then offers an interesting account of how those who are tempted by the Doctrine of Abstraction arrive at the conviction that finite extension is infinitely divisible. He begins by noting that geometrical reasoning treats particular finite lengths (such as an inch) as signs or representatives of much longer finite lengths (such as a mile). He then hypothesizes that abstractionists fail to distinguish between signifier and signified, and thereby come to see relatively short finite lengths as containing many more parts than can be discerned by sense. It is then but a short step to the conclusion that even the shortest finite length is divisible into infinitely many parts (P 126-128), and indeed to the even more absurd conclusion that each of the infinitesimally small parts of a given finite length is itself ‘subdivisible into an infinity of other parts’ (P 130). But, as Berkeley notes, the fact that the purported axiom of infinite divisibility is logically independent of the other axioms of Euclidean geometry entails that it ‘may be pared off’ from the rest of the system ‘without prejudice to truth’, and without losing ‘whatever is useful in geometry and promotes the benefit of human life’ (P 131). Moreover, as Berkeley avers (without evidence), there is no theorem of geometry that requires for its proof the supposition of extension’s infinite divisibility (P 132).

[B] Sections 135-145: Idealism and the Knowledge of Finite Spirits
Berkeley argues that idealism is superior to materialism in respect of the possibility of knowledge of one’s own mind. A mind or spirit, so Berkeley has already argued, is, by its very nature, an ‘active thinking substance’, a substance that ‘knows or perceives [ideas], and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering about them’ (P 136 and P 2). Indeed, Berkeley adds, what the word ‘spirit’ means is ‘that which things, wills, and perceives’ (P 138); hence a spirit is something whose very existence consists in ‘perceiving ideas and thinking’ (P 139—see also P 98). Most materialists, Berkeley claims, think that knowledge in general is representational, that knowledge of X is possible only if one perceives an idea of X. (Locke, for example, claims in Book IV of the Essay that knowledge of X’s existence involves perception of an agreement between an idea of X and the idea of existence, while knowledge that X is F involves perception of an agreement between an idea of X and the idea of F-ness.) Most materialists, then, are committed to the view that knowledge of a mind (whether of its existence or of its properties) is possible only when one has an idea that represents it. But, as Berkeley emphasizes, materialists have struggled to identify ideas that represent spirits (P 137). This, as it turns out, is no surprise: for, by the Likeness Principle (P 8), it is impossible for an idea to resemble anything but an idea; hence, because representation presupposes resemblance, it is impossible for an idea to represent anything but an idea; and therefore, since minds are not ideas, it is impossible for an idea to represent a mind (P 135—see also P 27 and P 89). It follows that the materialist is committed to the impossibility of self-knowledge. By contrast, Berkeley holds that self-knowledge is possible, indeed actual, for ‘we comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflexion’ (P 89).
Berkeley anticipates an objection based on a theory of meaning that had become standard among materialists, and had been championed by Locke in particular. This is the theory that the meaning of any categorematic term (i.e., a term belonging to one of the ten categories of Aristotelian philosophy of language: substance, quantity, quality, relatives, somewhere, sometime, being in a position, having, acting, and being acted upon) is an idea that represents the term’s referent. If this ideational theory of meaning is true, then terms referring to minds are meaningless if, as Berkeley claims, ideas cannot represent minds (P 139). But, of course, as everyone allows, terms referring to minds are meaningful. Berkeley’s response, admittedly not stated in the clearest terms at P 139-140, but stated quite clearly and forcefully in the Introduction, is to reject the ideational theory of meaning, hook, line, and sinker. For the ‘chief…end of language,’ Berkeley writes, is not ‘the communicating of ideas marked by words’, but rather ‘the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, [or] the putting the mind in some particular disposition’. Thus, ‘when a Schoolman tells me Aristotle hath said it, all I conceive he means by it, is to dispose me to embrace his opinion with the deference and submission which custom has annexed to that name’ (P 20).

But what, then, on Berkeley’s view, is the meaning of the word ‘I’? In the Principles, Berkeley offers us an answer to this question that might seem initially unsatisfactory. What he says is that the meaning of ‘I’ is not an idea, but rather a notion, of my mind (P 142). This seems like trifling with words, a mere matter of replacing one word (‘idea’) with another (‘notion’), without explanation. But, in fact, the claim needs to be understood against the background of Berkeley’s theory of meaning, according to
which the meaning of ‘I’ consists in the use of the word to elicit passions (e.g., ‘I’m disappointed in you!’), deter actions (‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you!’), and so on.

Berkeley emphasizes that knowledge of the existence of other minds is not acquired in the way that knowledge of the existence of one’s own mind is acquired: whereas inward feeling or reflexion is sufficient for the latter sort of knowledge, only reason can provide us with the former sort of knowledge (P 89). The justification for belief in the existence of other minds (including God) consists in an inference to the best explanation of ‘several motions, changes, and combinations of ideas’ in one’s experience (P 145). As Berkeley argues, changes in our ideas that are produced according to regular, predictable patterns for our benefit (i.e., the laws of nature) are incontrovertible evidence of the existence of an infinite mind (P 29-31—see also P 146). We may reasonably presume, then, that what Berkeley takes to be sufficient evidence for the existence of other finite minds consists in ideational changes that are irregular, unpredictable, and sometimes gratuitously harmful.

[B] Sections 146-156: Idealism and Knowledge of God

Berkeley ends the Principles, fittingly from his perspective, with a discussion of the most important piece of knowledge in the idealist system, namely, knowledge of the existence of God. His aim is twofold: (i) to explain why ‘the existence of God is far more evidently perceived than the existence of men’ (P 147), and (ii) to produce the rudiments of a theodicy, an explanation of how it is possible for God to be the cause of a world that appears full of imperfection and pain.
The first point is straightforward. Berkeley holds that both finite spirits and God are known through their ‘effects or concomitant signs’ (P 145). But whereas there are relatively few concomitant signs of finite spirits (namely, ‘the motion of the limbs’ of the bodies that ‘serve to mark [them] out unto us’—P 147-148), the effects produced by God ‘are infinitely more numerous and considerable, than those ascribed to human agents’ (P 147). For, as Berkeley reminds us, ‘every thing we see, hear, feel, or any wise perceive by sense [is] a sign or effect of the power of God’ (P 148). It follows, then, that ‘nothing can be more evident to any one that is capable of the least reflexion, than the existence of God’ (P 149).

The second point is that the apparent imperfections and real pain that exist in the world are not inconsistent with the being and attributes of God. Berkeley recognizes that the production of natural things is often ‘slow and gradual’, and that nature is full of ‘monsters, untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, [and] rains falling in desert places’ (P 151). But, he argues, in order to bring about his perfect providential aims, God has ordained that nature be governed by laws with necessary byproducts that give the appearance of imperfection when narrowly considered (P 151). Moreover, the existence of some blemishes and defects in nature is required ‘to augment the beauty of the rest of the creation, as shades in a picture serve to set off the brighter and more enlightened parts’ (P 152). As for pain, Berkeley argues that ‘in the state we are in at present [it] is indispensably necessary to our well-being’, and, besides, pain that may strike us as evil when considered independently of its relation to other things (as when a leg is amputated) will come to be seen as good ‘when considered as linked with the whole system of beings’ (as when it becomes clear that amputation is necessary to save a human being from a
potentially fatal case of gangrene) (P 153). Berkeley then concludes the Principles by emphasizing that recognition of God’s existence and the ‘holy fear’ of his power to punish us for transgressing his moral laws serves as ‘the strongest incentive to virtue’, hopefully thereby achieving his two main aims in writing the work, promotion of ‘the consideration of God, and our duty’ (P 155-156).

Samuel C. Rickless
University of California, San Diego