# Three Dialogues between Hylas, Philonous and the Sceptic

I am farthest from scepticism of any man – Berkeley, NB 563

Nay, I will proceed so far with him, if he still persists to charge me of the want of this, as to uphold against him that he himself is the man who is guilty of the scepticism of denying the existence of all visible objects; nay, that he cannot shew another in the world, besides Mr. Berkeley and myself, who hold the testimony of sense to be infallible as to this point. – Collier, Letter to Low, 8th March 1713/4

1. It is clear from the most cursory reading of George Berkeley’s works that throughout his life he took atheism and scepticism to be moral and intellectual vices with the potential to wreak havoc in civil society. While happy acceptance of these labels was restricted to those who also identified themselves as ‘free-thinkers’ – that is as willing to challenge custom and tradition in manners, morals and metaphysics – both atheism and scepticism are formally just philosophical theses which may be reached on the basis of better or worse arguments. Hence it became Berkeley’s philosophical project to provide compelling arguments for a system which entailed the falsity of both atheism and scepticism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The project officially launched with the publication of A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge in 1710, the subtitle of which is: ‘Wherein the Chief Causes of Error and Difficulty in the Sciences, with the grounds of Scepticism, Atheism, and Irreligion, are inquired into’. In that work, however, scepticism plays a minor role with just one short substantive discussion (P 86-9) and the remainder of the references being largely pejorative and adding little to the argument. But in Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (1713) the engagement with the sceptic becomes the over-riding dialectical device, to the extent that in the 3rd edition of 1734, bound together with a reprinting of the Principles, the subtitle is reduced to ‘In Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Clearly Berkeley thought the label ‘sceptic’ would have just as much significance for his readership as the label ‘atheist’, that is that they would know what he was talking about and agree with him that scepticism was a bad thing. But this bears further investigation, for there is at least one well-known sceptical author, Michel de Montaigne, whose work was very influential throughout the late16th and 17th centuries and would have been owned by many Berkeley was expecting to buy his books, who had seen his way through scepticism to an apparently orthodox religious position which was for some time accepted by the church (at least, many French anti-Calvinists) (Popkin, 2003, p. 66ff). Montaigne had realized that the Pyrrhonist aporia meant that one should just go along with whatever seemed right to one (Sextus, I.19-21), and as someone brought up in orthodox Christianity, his scepticism gave him no grounds for challenging those appearances: ‘we are Christians by the same title as we are either Perigordians or Germans’ (Montaigne II.12, p. 161). Similarly, Pierre Gassendi had developed a sceptical position which was intended to be intellectually respectable and religiously orthodox. Hence there were well-known examples of sceptical positions which did not appear to threaten morals and society in the way Berkeley feared. So we need to understand exactly what Berkeley had in mind.

In this essay I will examine presence of scepticism in the Three Dialogues in the light of the likely understanding that Berkeley would have had of sceptical positions and arguments. My project then is almost exactly that undertaken by Richard Popkin in his famous ‘Berkeley and Pyrrhonism’ (1951), though it will be both narrower, concentrating on just the one text of Berkeley’s, and wider in scope, drawing upon more sceptical sources than Popkin’s almost exclusive focus on Pierre Bayle. We can immediately see the value of this approach by considering Popkin’s discussion of Berkeley’s ‘definition’ of scepticism:

First of all, what did Berkeley mean by scepticism? This doctrine is defined either explicitly or implicitly in the Philosophical Commentaries [Notebooks], the Principles, and the Dialogues. Altogether Berkeley attributes three doctrines to the sceptics: (1) the sceptic doubts everything; (2) the sceptic doubts the validity [sic] of sensible things; (3) the sceptic doubts the existence of real objects like bodies or souls. These three different views constitute the core of the sceptical view for Berkeley. The second and third are corollaries of the first, and were for Berkeley the most interesting features of the position. (1951, p. 226-7)

Popkin gives sources for (1) – (3) from the Notebooks, the correspondence with Percival, the Principles and the Three Dialogues.[[3]](#endnote-3) But if we concentrate on the explicit definition in the Three Dialogues, we see that there is something rather odd about Popkin’s account: he is trying to force on Berkeley a definition of scepticism rather more in line with traditional accounts of scepticism than the text supports. Hylas actually says:

HYLAS: … I said indeed, that a sceptic was one who doubted of every thing; but I should have added, or who denies the reality and truth of things. (3D 173)

Notice that Hylas has started with Popkin’s (1) but here adds a further condition, namely a denial, whereas Popkin’s (2) and (3) are further doubts.[[4]](#endnote-4) It is quickly established that the things in question are ‘sensible things’ and that ‘denying the real existence of sensible things is sufficient to denominate a man a sceptic’ (3D 173). The context for this addition is Philonous pointing out that with just the doubt-condition for scepticism, neither materialist nor immaterialist would count as sceptics because ‘He then that denieth any point, can no more be said to doubt of it, than he who affirmeth it with the same degree of assurance’ (3D 173). Furthermore, denying the existence of anything is certainly not a corollary of doubting everything, so it is quite clear that Berkeley intends his definition of scepticism to be broader than merely the traditional characterization of Pyrrhonism.

We might reasonably wonder why Berkeley thought his readers would accept this. After all, even a fairly superficial reading of Book I of Sextus’s Hypostases would reveal that denying the existence of something is dogmatism not scepticism, and that work was widely available by 1713 in Latin (Stephanus, 1562), Greek (Chouet, 1621) and English (Stanley, 1656/1687). Popkin thinks that Berkeley is drawing on Bayle, e.g.:

The ‘new’ philosophers … have so well understood the bases of suspension of judgement with regard to sounds, smells, heat, cold, hardness, softness, heaviness and lightness, tastes, colours, and the like, that they teach that all these qualities are perceptions of our soul and that they do not exist at all in the objects of our senses. (Zeno of Elea, Remark G, p. 364-5)

However, Bayle was careful to say, precisely where I have put ellipses in the above quotation, ‘although they are not sceptics’; so while Bayle may be a source for some aspects of Berkeley’s thought, he is not an authority for the extension of the definition to denials of existence.

To find that authority and an explanation of why Berkeley might have expected his readers to accept the extended definition, we need to go to an often overlooked source for early modern understandings of scepticism, namely Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of Eminent Philosophers. While there is no evidence that Berkeley had read this by 1713 (though he had by 1745 since he makes two references in Siris), the work had been widely available in Latin since the late 15th century, was often cited by Montaigne, Thomas Stanley and Bayle, and had been translated into English in 1688/96 (‘by several hands’).[[5]](#endnote-5) We can then reasonably assume that Berkeley knew it himself[[6]](#endnote-6) and expected his readers to know it as well. And in the chapter on Pyrrho we find the following passage, which is striking in the present context, where Diogenes lists some others who have been called sceptics:

… and Zeno [of Elea] because he would destroy motion, saying “A moving body moves neither where it is nor where it is not”; Democritus because he rejects qualities, saying, “Opinion says hot or cold, but the reality is atoms and empty space.” (p. 485)[[7]](#endnote-7)

Thus Berkeley is neither focusing exclusively on doubt, as Popkin claims, but nor is he being idiosyncratic in his extension of the definition to include denials of existence.

2. The extended definition of scepticism is crucial to the dialectic of, and provides most of the drama in, the Three Dialogues. The doctrine makes its first appearance in the Preface,[[8]](#endnote-8) where it is closely allied to ‘paradoxes’:

Upon the common principles of philosophers, we are not assured of the existence of things from their being perceived. And we are taught to distinguish their real nature from that which falls under our senses. Hence arise scepticismand paradoxes. … We spend our lives in doubting of those things which other men evidently know, and believing those things which they laugh at, and despise. (3D 167)

Here the sceptic is characterized as claiming we do not know things which we think we do (either because they are false or because we lack the means of knowing) whereas the paradox-monger is claiming to know something others take to be obviously false, hence ‘the affected doubts of some philosophers, and fantastical conceits of others’ (3D 172). We see the paradoxes come in to play when Hylas gives a mechanistic explanation of sound and Philonous responds:

But can you think it no more than a philosophical paradox, to say that real sounds are never heard, and that the idea of them is obtained by some other sense. (3D 183)

Now, at this point we have the ideal materials for a Pyrrhonist to bring about epoche: there are two ‘opposing accounts’ of sound, that of ordinary experience and that of the mechanistic science, and they seem ‘equipollent’ (Sextus I.8). The ‘account’ of sound based on ordinary experience is that the sound of a violin being played in the next room is part of the real, extra-mental[[9]](#endnote-9) world and has its auditory characteristics essentially. The mechanistic account, in contrast, is that the real, extra-mental world contains ‘merely a vibrative or undulatory motion in the air’ (3D 182) produced by the playing of the violin. These motions may cause auditory ideas within the minds of perceivers, but those ideas are not part of extra-mental reality.

Hylas, however, doesn’t seem to find the two accounts equipollent and prefers the mechanistic account of what is real, even if that means accepting ‘that sounds have no real being without the mind’ (3D 182). In 20th century terms, when his attempted reductive account is shown to fail, he merely re-categorizes it as eliminativist. Which is to say, Hylas takes the common sense, experiential account of sounds to be what they would be like if they were to exist without the mind, and the mechanistic account to be correct as to what in fact exists (in extra-mental reality).

The mechanistic account of the phenomena, by conflicting with the way the world is experienced to be, create a complicated set of options for the philosopher, which Berkeley is exploring through the dialectical move of rejecting paradoxes. If both accounts are equipollent, then Pyrrhonian epoche follows. But if they are not equipollent, then, because each makes a claim both about what exists and what its nature is (‘after what manner you suppose it to exist, or what you mean by its existence’ (3D 222)), there are several options:

1. Experience is right about what exists and mechanism is right about its nature = the paradox that real sounds are not heard but felt, which is rejected by Hylas as too paradoxical.
2. Experience is right about the nature of the phenomena (e.g. sound) but mechanism is right about what really exists without the mind = Hylas’s eliminativism
3. The mechanistic account is right on both counts, i.e. there are no sounds without the mind, only motions = veil of perception realism (e.g. 3D 192; cf. 3D Second Dialogue *passim*)
4. Experience is right on both counts = Berkeley’s immaterialism

Thus the unacceptability of the paradoxical position, that real sounds are not heard, becomes a tool to force the mechanist to choose between denying the reality of the phenomena (2 and 3) such as sounds and denying the reality of the material world (4). Despite both alternatives involving the denial of the existence of something, in the Three Dialogues this choice is not presented in such neutral terms but as that between scepticism and common sense. The point is not that common sense must be preserved at all costs, but that it is clearly better than scepticism or paradox. While Hylas insists that ‘the reality of things cannot be maintained without supposing the existence of matter’ (3D 224), Philonous is intent on showing that supposing the existence of matter, even though that avoids the Pyrrhonian epoche, leads to the unacceptable scepticism. I turn next to how this is achieved.

3. The book opens with Hylas expressing an opinion that we can imagine Berkeley heard several times in reaction to the Principles:[[10]](#endnote-10)

What! Can any thing be more fantastical, more repugnant to common sense, or a more manifest piece of scepticism, than to believe there is no such thing as matter? (3D 172)

Philonous picks up particularly on the charge of scepticism and sets about clarifying the terms of the debate, concluding:

Shall we therefore examine which if 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 sceptic? (3D 173)[[11]](#endnote-11)

The real interest, however, is not the definition but how it is employed. Here the strategy is to show that the combination of his materialism and a series of facts about perceptual experiences force Hylas into a position he must regard as sceptical by the definition. The first move, as ever, is crucial: Hylas is asked what he means by the ‘reality of sensible things’ which the sceptic is said to deny, and insists:

I mean a real absolute being, distinct from, and without any relation to their being perceived. (3D 175)

We saw this distinction at work when we analysed the paradox of the real sound not being heard, with the contrast being between ideas in the mind and the material causes of those ideas. While the early modern materialists Berkeley is primarily arguing against in the Three Dialogues were certainly committed to that, all that is actually needed here is the much more general distinction between appearance and truth which we find in Sextus, who opens the Hypostases with a tripartite division of philosophies into the Dogmatic, the Academic and the Sceptical:

… in the case of philosophical investigations, too, some have said that they have discovered the truth, some have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and others are still investigating [i.e. they have no opinion about the truth] (I.2)[[12]](#endnote-12)

But Sextus is at great pains to point out that this truth which the Dogmatists claim to have discovered, the Academics declared inaccessible and the Sceptics remain silent upon, is distinct from the appearances, with which the Sceptic is entirely comfortable:

… in uttering these [sceptical slogans] they say what is apparent to themselves and report their own feelings without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects. (I.15; cf. I.19-20, 192-3, 208)[[13]](#endnote-13)

Thus the Sceptic has the same starting point as the Dogmatist, namely a desire to find the truth, and the same contrast between such truths about the reality and nature of external objects, and mere appearances. Where they differ is that the Sceptic finds the process of enquiry produces not belief or opinion but puzzlement (aporia) and suspension of judgement (epoche) but only with respect to truth. The appearances remain untouched, or to be more precise, each person’s appearances remain untouched for them, because they are neither true nor false in this sense.

At the start of the second dialogue Hylas admits to being an ‘arrant sceptic’ (3D 210) by the criteria set out for the debate in the first dialogue, namely he has denied the reality of sensible things. He then proceeds to insist that for all that, there must be some material world, pushing himself towards the position of the ‘Academic’ who asserts that there are truths we do not apprehend. Philonous dispatches these attempts to defend a fairly extreme version of the ‘veil of perception’ realism, resulting in Hylas starting the third dialogue facing a sort of ‘crise pyrrhonienne’ (Popkin, 1951, p. 232):[[14]](#endnote-14)

HYLAS. Truly my opinion is, that all our opinions are alike vain and uncertain. What we approve to-day, we condemn tomorrow. We keep a stir about knowledge, and spend our lives in the pursuit of it, when, alas! we know nothing all the while: nor do I think it possible for us ever to know any thing in this life. Our faculties are too narrow and too few. Nature certainly never intended us for speculation. (3D 227)

Clearly Hylas has not found the tranquility of a Sextus or Montaigne, but what has gone wrong? One interpretation, championed by Myles Burnyeat (e.g. 1982, p.28), is that in a post-Cartesian context, appearances have been reified into ideas, and thereby become objects of knowledge in themselves.[[15]](#endnote-15) We can see this in Bayle’s description of how Cartesianism goes beyond Pyrrhonism:

Today the new philosophy speaks more positively. Heats, smells, colours, and the like, are not in the objects of our senses. They are modifications of my soul. I know that bodies are not at all as they appear to me. (Pyrrho, Remark B, p. 197)

Thus Hylas is left in the frustrating position of having knowledge of his mind, by knowing how things appear, but not of the world – knowledge is in principle something the human mind can achieve, just not about the external world:

HYLAS. … All you know, is, that you have such a certain idea or appearance in your own mind. But what is this to the real tree or stone? I tell you, that colour, figure, and hardness, which you perceive, are not the real natures of those things, or in the least like them. The same may be said of all other real things or corporeal substances which compose the world. They have none of them any thing in themselves, like those sensible qualities by us perceived. We should not therefore pretend to affirm or know any thing of them as they are in their own nature. (3D 227)

There is, of course, some truth in this and it is crucial for Berkeley’s avoidance of the problems he has dealt to Hylas that the sensible qualities are objects of knowledge. However, as a diagnosis of what is holding Hylas back from tranquility it is not quite right and nor is it the one that Berkeley himself offers.[[16]](#endnote-16) When Philonous comes to summarize Hylas’s predicament, he says:

PHILONOUS. It seems then we are altogether put off with the appearances of things, and those false ones too. The very meat I eat, and the cloth I wear, have nothing in them like what I see and feel. (3D 228)

The problem is not that the appearances are ideas and thus objects of knowledge, but that they are – all of them – misleading as to the truth Hylas was seeking. It is perfectly possible to hold the view that appearances are misleading without reifying them into ideas and treating them as a separate realm of knowledge. The key to Pyrrhonian tranquility is to stick with appearances and have no opinion whether they are misleading or not (for that would entail an opinion about external reality).

Berkeley’s solution, as is well-known, is to change the terms of the enquiry and deny that real existence and thus truth is distinct from appearance:

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. (3D 229)

The esse is percipi principle which this passage introduces is that the being, the real existence, of sensible things consists in their being perceived. The power of this principle, the reason Berkeley thought it so original, is that it not only undermines dogmatic materialism, but also Hylas’s crise pyrrhonienne and genuine Pyrrhonism. For if the nature and truth of things consists in appearances, then the very project of philosophical enquiry which is common to those three positions, namely the search for truth, both starts and ends with the appearances. Like the Pyrrhonian, Berkeley is satisfied with just stating the appearances, but unlike the Pyrrhonian, he thinks this is not a way of leaving the enquiry unfinished but an actual discovery. The appearances are the truth and reality of things.

Stanley translates the opening sentence of the Hypostases as:

It is likely, that they who seek, must either find, or deny they have or can find, or persevere in the enquiry. (1687, p. 776)

Berkeley is pointing out a fourth option: one might declare the object sought illusory, unseekable, a dangerous fantasy. However, while this move does cut off both dogmatism and Pyrrhonism, dialectically it is only effective against someone suffering la crise pyrrhonienne like Hylas. The dogmatist will, of course, not accept that the discoveries he has made are in fact illusory. So his dogmatism must first be undermined with sceptical arguments. But care must be taken not to engender Pyrrhonism, for this sceptic has found tranquility without finding what is sought, and is thus going to be indifferent to whether the project of enquiry was a misguided search for the unseekable – it has had the right effect whether misguided or not and he has no opinions about such matters. Thus Berkeley’s argument in the Three Dialogues turns upon having just the right amount and not too much scepticism; he needs to exploit the power of the sceptical arguments while avoiding the end they were intended to produce. A medical analogy from Sextus seems appropriate:

The chief witness to this argument is what is observed in the case of medicinal powers: here the accurate mixing of simple drugs makes the compound beneficial, but sometimes when the smallest error is made in the weighing it is not only not beneficial but extremely harmful and often poisonous. (I.133)[[17]](#endnote-17)

One of the striking differences between the Principles and the Three Dialogues is the lengthy discussion of perceptual phenomena in the first dialogue. We can now see that this is not just a matter of making explicit what he thought his readers already accepted. Rather he needs to ensure that their understanding of these phenomena and their consequences is precisely balanced to undermine dogmatism without engendering Pyrrhonism. We now turn to an examination of how Berkeley achieves this.

4. There is one passage in the first dialogue where it seems certain Berkeley is drawing directly on Sextus to the point of paraphrase:

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| For instance, people with jaundice say that what appears white to us is yellow, and people with blood-suffusion in the eye say that such things are blood-red. Since, then, the eyes of some animals are yellow, of others blood-shot or white or some other colour, it is likely, I think, that their grasp of colours is different. … It is surely far more reasonable, given that animals’ eyes contain mixtures of different humours, that they should also get different appearances from existing objects. (I.44/46)[[18]](#endnote-18) | In the jaundice, every one 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 humours, do not see the same colours in every object that we do? (3D 185) |

Sextus is clear that the modes (or ‘places’ in Stanley) are not arguments aiming to bring about acceptance of a proposition, but ways of bringing about suspension of judgement. These passages are from the first mode, which seemed to have an extraordinary impact on the early modern imagination,[[19]](#endnote-19) where Sextus lists many differences between animals – how they reproduce, how they perceive and their preferences and aversions – with the intention of undermining our confidence that our senses reveal the objects as they really are. He is not trying to persuade us that we mis-perceive colours and the cat or the rat get it right, but instead to settle with ‘this is how it seems to me’ and have no opinion about what the real colours are.

In contrast, Philonous encourages Hylas to draw a conclusion and a strikingly different one:

From all[[20]](#endnote-20) which, should it not seem to follow, that all colours are equally apparent, and that none of those which we perceive are really inherent in any outward object? (3D 185) [Berkeley in Principles15 does note perceptual relativity examples can’t show objects have no one true color.]

As we saw in the last section, persuading Hylas that he is committed to all appearances being illusory is crucial to achieving the delicate balance of undermining dogmatism and avoiding Pyrrhonism. To see how Berkeley achieves that, we need to go back to the beginning of the discussion of colours. Here Philonous introduces the example of the clouds at dawn:

PHILONOUS. What! are 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 vapour? (3D 184)

Now, to a close reader of Sextus, this might look like an instance of the fifth mode ‘depending on positions and intervals and places’ (I.118) in which the oar in water and the pigeon’s neck both appear.[[21]](#endnote-21) But instead of treating it like that, Philonous lets Hylas develop a criterion[[22]](#endnote-22) for which perceived colour is the real colour (those ‘discovered by the most near and exact survey’ (3D 184)), thereby establishing that the opposing appearances here are sufficient to render one of the colours unreal and merely apparent. Rather than undermine the criterion, Philonous uses it to show that the allegedly real member of the apparent-real opposing pair turns out by the same criterion to be apparent when considered against a third perception, namely what is seen through a microscope. This is the clever logical move: he has shown that the criterion is not actually a criterion of real colour but of apparent colour. Applying the criterion shows that the red and purple in the clouds is apparent but not that the grey is real, for a further application might show that to be equally apparent.

At this point we are confronted with two ways this sequence might extend indefinitely. It might be that microscopes become more and more powerful, so we have a sequence of opposing pairs of possible experiences between ever stronger microscopes. But also, when we do look through actual microscopes, we perceive ‘inconceivably small animals’ (3D 185) whose vision is presumably tuned to their microscopic environment. This generates a sequence of possible experiences of ever smaller animals. However, it is not necessary for the argument to work that the sequence is indefinite, merely that it extends beyond our own experiences, because then the application of the criterion within our experience will never establish that a given experience is of the real colour (or size or shape) of the object, merely that it ‘opposes’ an experience of apparent colour.

5. We can see a different strategy Berkeley has for re-purposing sceptical modes in his discussion of heat and cold. Having convinced Hylas that intense heat and cold are both pains and thus not real existences in the external objects, the discussion moves to moderate degrees of heat and cold. Here Philonous offers Hylas a criterion of the real for moderate heat, which he accepts:[[23]](#endnote-23)

Those bodies therefore, upon whose application to our own, we perceive a moderate degree of heat, must be concluded to have a moderate degree of heat or warmth in them: and those, upon whose application we feel a like degree of cold, must be thought to have cold in them. (3D 178)

Philonous then proceeds to trap Hylas with the example of the hot and cold hands in water, a version of two examples in Sextus’s fourth mode:

The same water seems to be boiling when poured on to inflamed places, but to us to be lukewarm. (I.101)

The bathhouse vestibule warms people entering from outside by chills people leaving if they spend any time there. (I.110)[[24]](#endnote-24)

In this case Berkeley avoids the Pyrrhonist suspension of judgement by showing that by his criterion the water is both really cold and really warm, which is taken to be an absurdity by Hylas and thus a reductio of his criterion of the real. Hylas retorts:

But after all, can any thing be more absurd than to say, there is no heat in the fire? (3D 179)

At this point he is teetering on the brink of Pyrrhonism: he has been persuaded that his way of determining what heat there is in the fire leads to an absurdity, but to deny that there is heat in the fire is equally absurd. Suspension of judgement beckons. Philonous blocks this by drawing Hylas’s attention to the analogy between the way a pin causes pain and a ‘coal burns your finger’ (3D 179). This looks like an allusion to John Locke’s Essay:

After the same manner that the ideas of these original qualities are produced in us, we may conceive that the ideas of secondary qualities are also produced, viz. by the operation of insensible particles on our senses. … v.g. that a violet, by the impulse of such insensible particles of matter of peculiar figures and bulks, and in different degrees and modifications of their motions, causes the ideas of the blue colour and sweet scent of that flower, to be produced in our minds; it being no more impossible to conceive that God should annex such ideas to such motions, with which they have no similitude, than that he should annex the idea of pain to the motion of a piece of steel dividing our flesh , with which that idea hath no resemblance. (2.8.13)

However, in the example given, there is no need to appeal to the mechanist’s ‘insensible particles’ because Berkeley has carefully chosen an example which, unlike Locke’s blue violet, mirrors the clearly perceptible process by which the pain is caused in us by the pin: just as we see the pin causing damage to our finger, we see the coal causing heat in our finger, so we think that the process which results in a sensation in each case must be the same. Yet it is no absurdity to say there is no pain in the pin. [[25]](#endnote-25) In fact, it was precisely Hylas’s acceptance that pain is not in the fire that made the argument that a great heat is a pain effective.

Again, Philonous has used the sceptical modes to undermine Hylas’s initial dogmatism, but blocked the move to Pyrrhonism by persuading Hylas that he is committed to all appearances being illusory.

6. At this point Hylas introduces the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as ‘an opinion current among philosophers’ (3D 188), with the intention of restricting his claim that he is not a sceptic and does not deny the reality of sensible things. So far the discussion has been restricted to secondary qualities, but Philonous responds:

But what if the same arguments which are brought against secondary qualities, will hold good against these [primary qualities] also? (3D 188)

As Popkin pointed out, Berkeley here seems to be drawing upon Bayle, who quite explicitly credited the point to Simon Foucher’s Critique de la recherche de la vérité (Bayle, Pyrrho, Remark B, fn. 11, p. 197).[[26]](#endnote-26) But while Bayle is astute to spot the power of the point and is fully aware of the difference between genuine Pyrrhonism and this denial of the reality of sensible qualities, he does not have Berkeley’s concern to use the sceptical arguments to undermine dogmatic materialism without engendering Pyrrhonism. Consequently his presentation of the point lacks Berkeley’s care and sophistication, simply noting ‘if the objects of our senses appear coloured [etc.] and yet they are not so, why can they not appear extended [etc.] though they are not so?’ (Bayle, p. 197), before discussing whether this makes God a deceiver.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Berkeley’s discussion of primary qualities (3D 188-94) has many original elements. He begins with consideration of extension, or more specifically size, and follows the Pyrrhonists first mode by again comparing human perception with other animals, emphasizing the way we can expect the difference in size of the animals to result in difference in their perception of size: ‘A mite therefore must be supposed to see his own foot, and things equal or even less than it, as bodies of some considerable dimension’ (3D 188). However, Berkeley’s argument is significantly different from the arguments found in Sextus in two respects. First, he appeals not just to physical variation but also to teleology. Secondly, the appeal to teleology would not work for e.g. colours, so he is committed to a difference between primary and secondary qualities: other animals may see colours differently but must see size differently.

The appeal to teleology is implicitly creationist:

PHILONOUS: Answer me, Hylas. Think you the senses were bestowed upon all animals for their preservation and well-being in life? Or were they given to men alone for this end? (3D 188)

As such this is neither a move the Pyrrhonist could make nor one that is dialectically appropriate given that the existence of God is yet to be demonstrated. What Sextus does talk about are ‘parts of the body … which are naturally fitted for deciding and perceiving’ (I.44),[[28]](#endnote-28) which is an appeal to biological function appropriate for a physician to make. And in fact this weaker claim will suffice for Berkeley’s purposes if we add a further observation that these creatures are reasonably successful in avoiding harms. For example, contemporary biologists are inclined to argue that the ability of a housefly to avoid being swatted is evidence that the motion of our hand which looks fast to us looks slow to the fly.[[29]](#endnote-29)

What is striking about Berkeley’s teleological move, even when naturalized, is that he only applies it to the primary qualities. One might expect Berkeley to say that, for example, the cold of an arctic sea is a pain for any human who swims in it, but it clearly isn’t for the fish that live there, or that the deer escapes the hunt by hearing sounds a human cannot, but he doesn’t. Rather, where he does cite inter-species variation in perception of secondary qualities, he appeals not to the avoidance of harm but to difference in preferences. For instance, in the discussion of odours he refers to ‘brute animals’ that eat ‘filth and ordure’ ‘out of choice’ (3D 181): this is not an appeal to teleology but an instance of the appeal to preferences which we also find in the first mode (Sextus, I.55).[[30]](#endnote-30)

So while Berkeley is attacking certain uses of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, the way he marshalls the sceptical arguments reveals that he is committed to some form of the distinction: the perception of both sorts of quality enables the creature of seek pleasure and avoid pain (‘the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure’ (P 146)), but in the case of secondary qualities the connection between a given quality and pain or pleasure is arbitrary, whereas in the case of primary qualities it is not. So whether a given taste or smell or degree of heat causes pleasure or pain may vary between creatures but is not something we can work out a priori. In contrast, we can work out a priori that an object which is large, solid and fast-moving relative to the size, hardness and motion of a given creature will cause that creature harm.

Furthermore, not only is Berkeley committed to some version of the primary-secondary quality distinction, he comes close to accepting the Cartesian view that extension is the principal or fundamental primary quality. While the Cartesian will say that the other primary qualities are modes of extension, which Berkeley doesn’t accept, he does say that ‘motion, solidity, and gravity … all evidently suppose extension’ (3D 191). Clearly his thought here is that having either motion or solidity or gravity entails having some extension, and that seems right. However, it is not so clear whether Berkeley should also accept the reverse entailment: if something is extended it also must have some degree of motion, solidity and gravity. That depends upon whether we regard e.g. not moving as having a degree of motion (namely zero) or as lacking motion. One might think that Berkeley is committed to all physical objects having some positive extension, specifically at least one minimum sensibilium, in order to exist at all, but that is not the case. For a start, there is no cross-modal property of extension, so at the very least Berkeley should say that everything must have either visible or tangible or … extension. Since the Berkeleian doctrine is that esse is percipere and not just videre vel tangere, he is committed to the real existence of merely heard, tasted or smelled objects, such as echoes and aromas. Now while echoes and aromas may have approximate locations and may even sometimes move, it is not obvious that all odours and sounds have extension. (Tastes are different because it may be that only tangible objects can be tasted.) In which case there would be real existence without extension, and the correct way of stating that motion etc. ‘supposes extension’ would be: if – but not only if – anything has a positive degree of motion etc., it has a positive degree of extension.

Berkeley’s really distinctive contribution, however, is not over the dependency between these primary qualities, but the claim that the primary qualities depend upon the secondary. If it is not possible, Berkeley argues, for there to be primary qualities without secondary, and if the ‘new philosophers’ have persuaded themselves that the secondary qualities lack real existence, they must conclude that the primary qualities also lack real existence. Thus the sceptical, but not Pyrrhonian, denial of the reality of things is reached without having to apply the sceptical modes to primary qualities. Instead there is just an appeal to a fairly plausible general principle about conception and possibility:

PHILONOUS: And can you think it possible, that should really exist in Nature, which implies a repugnancy in its conception?

HYLAS: By no means. (3D 194)

Note that this principle does not entail that what is conceivable is possible nor even that what is possible is conceivable. Rather it simply states that if, in attempting to conceive something you run into a contradiction, then that thing is not possible. Hylas doesn’t take much persuading that attempting to conceive of primary qualities without secondary leads to a contradiction, but considering an example makes it clear how the inference is meant to go. Try to conceive of some specific sensible extension, say a visible circle of 1m­diameter, without conceiving of it as having some (chromatic or non-chromatic) colour. To conceive of the circle we must conceive of its edge, but to conceive of an edge is to conceive of a boundary marked by some change in qualities, and given that it is a visible circle we are trying to conceive, this must be a visible change. What could this be apart from a colour difference between the circle and its background or a line marking the edge in a colour different from the circle and background? Another primary quality such as motion will not suffice: a rotating circle against a static background would only be visible in virtue of its motion if the motion were visible, and the motion would only be visible if something visible moved. That cannot be the circle itself since we are using the motion to discriminate the circle, so we must be able to discriminate some part of the circle, and all the same issues recur. The only way to conceive of a visible circle involves conceiving of colours, and thus the attempt to conceive of the circle without colour is self-defeating.

Hylas immediately realizes that the only way to avoid the full-blown denial of the reality of sensible things now is to re-evaluate the arguments which led him to la crise pyrrhonienne about secondary qualities in the first place, and consequently he immediately moves into proposing an act-object model of perception. Berkeley makes no further use of sceptical arguments, instead engaging with the theology, metaphysics and philosophy of science of his contemporaries in order to defend immaterialism as a way out of ‘that phrensy of the ancient and modern sceptics’ (3D 258).

7. Our close look at the presence of scepticism in the Three Dialogues has revealed Berkeley’s sophisticated strategy of using the sceptical arguments to force the materialist into a crisis where immaterialism presents the only acceptable way out. He is fully aware that a genuine Pyrrhonist would no more want to accept immaterialism than materialism for he has found tranquility in suspension of judgement. This is why Berkeley quickly moves the discussion of scepticism away from doubt to denial of the reality of things. His readers would have been well aware that he was drawing upon sceptical sources for his arguments, though they might not have noticed the care and subtly with which he did so, and thus his eventual escape from scepticism through immaterialism was all the more powerful. The literary effect is very similar to René Descartes’ Meditations, though the escape from scepticism is much simpler. Where Descartes’ challenges concern the effectiveness of his arguments for his self, for God and for bodies in Meditation II – VI, Berkeley’s challenges come from the direct objections to the adequacy of his positive view. When Hylas insists in the second dialogue that ‘the reality of things cannot be maintained without supposing the existence of matter’ (3D 224), he is expressing the thought that whatever may be achieved by immaterialism by way of response to the sceptic, it leaves us with less of a real world than we wanted. Scepticism has receded and the focus in now on the adequacy of Berkeley’s system. The third dialogue is a sustained attempt to answer that criticism and show that everything we really cared about remains in place. Few have been convinced.[[31]](#endnote-31)

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1. ‘As it was my intention to convince sceptics and infidelsby reason, so it has been my endeavour strictly to observe the most rigid laws of reasoning.’ (3D 168) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In the 1713 and 1725 editions, the full subtitle was: ‘The design of which is plainly to demonstrate the reality and perfection of human knowledge, the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a Deity: in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists. Also to open a method for rendering the Sciences more easy, useful, and compendious.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interestingly, he doesn’t look at the later works, omitting the discussions of scepticism and freethinking in Alicphron (1732). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. To be fair, Popkin might be using ‘doubt’ in the loose, vernacular sense which includes denial, but Berkeley makes a clear distinction between doubt and denial in the Three Dialogues and the sceptical epoche clearly excludes denial. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The article on Pyrrho only appears in the extended 1696 edition. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A fact that suggests Berkeley knew the text well is that the names ‘Euphranor’ and ‘Lysicles’ (the two freethinkers in Alciphron) both make brief appearances in Diogenes Laertius though neither is the subject of an article. The 1688-96 translation in fact mis-transliterates ‘Lysicles’ as ‘Lysiclides’. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. One might also suspect that Bayle’s decision to reintroduce discussion of the sceptical modes in Remark G of the article on Zeno of Elea was prompted by this passage. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Preface was omitted from the 1734 edition, perhaps because literary fashions had changed, or perhaps because Berkeley no longer felt the same need to publically justify publishing a book. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Berkeley’s phrase ‘without the mind’ is deliberately ambiguous between ‘outside the mind’ and ‘independent of the mind’. While Hylas takes ideas to be within, and thus dependent upon, the mind, Philonous will go on to separate the two and claim that ideas are outside the mind that perceives them even if they only exist when perceived: ‘I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things’ (3D 244). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a record of perhaps the first such reaction and Berkeley’s response, see the correspondence with Percival in August and September 1710 (Hight, 2013, Letters 17 and 18). Here Berkeley notes that he was afraid of being charged with scepticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is worth observing that Philonous is not endorsing Hylas’s extension of the definition of scepticism here – though as I argued above, Berkeley might expect his readers to accept it. This is presumably because he knows that it is not consistent with Pyrrhonism. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. While I am quoting from the best modern translation of Sextus (Annas & Barnes), it is worth checking against the best English translation which would have been available to Berkeley and his readers, namely that in Thomas Stanley’s The History of Philosophy (1656, 2nd edition 1687):

    Hence (it may be) some of those who profess Philosophy, declare, they have found the Truth; others hold it impossible to be found; others still enquire. (1687, p. 776) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Stanley:

    Moreover, in these Expressions he speaketh that which appreareth so to him, and declareth how he is affected without engaging his Opinion, (or Judgment) but ascertaining nothing concerning external objects. (1687, p. 777) [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. It is important to remember that ‘la crise pyrrhonienne’ is not the state of mind of a sceptic but of one who reaches aporia in the face of sceptical arguments but lacks the appropriate disposition to respond with epoche and ultimately ataraxia (Sextus, I.25-30). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Burnyeat in fact traces this to Augustine, but its impact philosophically is mediated by Descartes. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. A very different diagnosis of why la crise pyrrhonienne does not lead to tranquility is offered by Pascal:

    We perceive an image of the truth and possess nothing but falsehood, being equally incapable of absolute ignorance and certain knowledge; so obvious is it that we once enjoyed a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen. (L.131)

    Berkeley quotes La Vie de M. Pascal (by his sister Gilberte) in Passive Obedience (1712) so had at least that much awareness of Pascal’s thought. Whether he had read Pascal’s analysis of scepticism we do not know. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Stanley:

    This is most evident in Medicine; a just measure in their Composition is beneficial; but sometimes, to put in ever so little more or less, is not only not beneficial, but destructive, and often deadly. (1687, p. 784) [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Stanley:

    Those things which to us seem White, they who have the Yellow Jaundice affirm to be Yellow, and they who have a Hyphosphagme in their Eyes, Red. As therefore, of living Creatures, some have Eyes Bloud red, others Whitish, others of other Colours, it is likely they perceive Colours after different manners. … Much more(a) likely is it, that the humours, mixed in the Eyes of living Creatures, being different, they have different Phantasies, from the same Object. (1687, p. 779) [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. For instance, the claim about jaundice is false but consistently repeated as fact by authors across the period, including, we have seen, Berkeley. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The jaundice example is preceded by a discussion of ‘inconceivably small animals perceived by glasses’ who are presumed to see things differently and especially things too small for us to see. This is an updating of Sextus’s ‘dogs, fish, lions, humans and locusts do not see the same things as equal in size or similar in shape’ (I.49). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Berkeley mentions both those examples at 3D 258 as instances of arguments against ‘the reality of corporeal things’ based the supposition that ‘reality consist[s] in an external absolute existence’. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Sextus anticipates this move but gives a very weak regress argument in response (I.121-3). Assuming Berkeley was familiar with Sextus helps us understand why he argues as he does at this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Hylas accepts the same criterion of the real for extension at 3D 188 and the argument follows the same pattern, ingeniously creating a version of the two hands in water example by imagining looking down a microscope with one eye while keeping the other open. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Stanley:

    Again, the same water poured upon any Part that is Inflamed seems scalding, to us, lukewarm: …

    The Parastas of a Bath warms those that go in, cools those who go out, if they have stay’d any while in it. (1687, p. 782-3) [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This needs some careful handling by Berkeley because when he rejects the materialist’s criterion of real existence for sensible qualities, he is going to have to say the intense heat I feel when my hand is in the fire exists in the fire, and it is identical to the pain I feel. Thus pain exists in the fire. Of course, for Berkeley that doesn’t mean it inheres in the fire, but it looks like it has to be a sensible quality in the collection which constitutes the fire. So, while fires don’t cause pain or feel pain, they do have pain, in the same sense that they have heat and colour. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It has been suggested that Bayle’s memory of Foucher’s views was not all that good (Lennon & Hickson, 2014, §6). However, he may just be misremembering his source, which could be Foucher’s Nouvelle Dissertation (see 1679, p. 78-9). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. It is worth noting that Hylas’s only appeal to a non-deceiving God is a form of the ‘consent of nations’ argument but applied to matter: ‘Do you imagine, he would have induced the whole world to believe the being of matter, if there was no such thing?’ (3D 243). Like Descartes, Berkeley is very careful to note the point at which God is introduced into his philosophy, but while Descartes introduces God before the substantive metaphysics, Berkeley does it on the back of his immaterialism. Hence, dialectically, neither he nor his opponents can appeal to a non-deceiving God. The badness of scepticism has to be independent of that. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Stanley: ‘those which Nature made for Judgment and Sense’ (1687, p. 779). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/small-animals-live-in-a-slow-motion-world/> [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. The specific example of eating ordure is not found in Sextus but is in Diogenes Laertius and is mentioned several times by Montaigne. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Many thanks to John Blechl for help with preparing the final text. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)