

OF THE EXISTENCE OF A MATERIAL WORLD

By Thomas Reid

From Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense (1764)

Philosophy claims to demonstrate a priori that there can't be any such thing as a material world; that sun, moon, stars and earth, and vegetable and animal bodies, can't be anything but sensations in the mind, or copies of those sensations in the memory and imagination; that like pain and joy they can't exist when they are not thought of. Common sense can't avoid thinking of this opinion as a kind of metaphysical lunacy. It concludes that too much learning is apt to make men mad, and that anyone who seriously entertains this belief, though in other respects he may be a very good man (the same may be true of a man who believes that he is made of glass!), surely has a soft place in his understanding, and has been hurt by thinking too much. . . .

If this is wisdom, let me be deluded with the vulgar! ... A man who has a deeply respectful view of his own kind, and who values true wisdom and philosophy, won't be fond of such strange and paradoxical opinions as those of Berkeley; indeed he will be very suspicious of them. If they are false, they disgrace philosophy; and if they are true, they degrade the human species and make us rightly ashamed of being as we are.

What is the point of philosophy's deciding against common sense on this or any other topic? The belief in a material world is older, and has more authority, than any principles of philosophy. It rejects the tribunal of reason, and laughs at all the artillery of the logician. It keeps its supreme authority in spite of all the edicts of philosophy, and reason itself must bow down and obey its commands. Even the philosophers who have disowned the authority of our notions of an external material world admit that they find themselves having to submitting to the power of those notions.

So I think it would be better to make a virtue of necessity! Since we can't get rid of the vulgar notion of and belief in an external world, let us reconcile our reason to it as well as we can; for Reason can't throw off this yoke, however resentful and fretful it makes her; if she refuses to be the servant of Common Sense she will have to be her slave.

In order to reconcile reason to common sense in this matter, I venture to offer two thoughts for philosophers to consider:

(1) In all this debate about the existence of a material world, it has been taken for granted on both sides that if there is a material world it must be exactly like our sensations; that we can't have any conception of a

material thing that isn't like some sensation in our minds; and in particular that the sensations of touch are like extension, hardness, shape and motion. All Berkeley's and Hume's arguments against the existence of a material world presuppose this. If this presupposition is true, their arguments are conclusive and unanswerable; but if it isn't true, there is no shadow of argument left. Well, then, have those philosophers given any solid proof of this hypothesis on which rests the whole weight of the strange system according to which there is no material world? No. They haven't even tried to do it, and have merely taken it for granted because ancient and modern philosophers have accepted it. But let us do what philosophers should do - set aside appeals to authority. Surely we don't need to consult Aristotle or Locke to know whether pain is like the point of a sword! I have as clear a conception of extension, hardness and motion as I have of the point of a sword; and if I work at it and practice, I can form as clear a notion of the other sensations of touch as I have of pain. When I do so, and compare them together - i.e. survey in my thought those qualities and the sensations that signify them - it appears to me clear as daylight that the qualities are not kindred to the sensations and don't resemble them in any respect. They are as unlike one another - indeed, as certainly and plainly unlike - as are pain and the point of a sword. It may be true that those sensations first brought the material world to our knowledge; it may be true that it seldom or never appears except in company with them; but still they are as unlike as the passion of anger is unlike the facial expressions that go with it.

So that when those philosophers have passed sentence on the material world, there has been a case of mistaken identity. Their proof doesn't get to matter or to any of its qualities, and strikes directly against an idol of their own imagination, a 'material world' made of ideas and sensations - a world that never did and never can exist.

(2) Our conceptions of extension, shape and motion are not ideas of sensation or of reflection, so the mere fact that they exist overturns the whole ideal system by which the material world has been tried and condemned; so that in this sentence that Hume and Berkeley have passed on the material world there is an error in law.

Locke made a very fine and sound observation, namely that just as no human skill can create a single particle of matter, and our only power over the material world is a power to compound, combine and disconnect the matter that comes to our hands, so in the world of thought the materials are all made by nature and can only be variously connected and disconnected by us. It follows from this that it is impossible for reason or prejudice, true or false philosophy, to produce one simple notion or conception that isn't the work of nature and a result of how we are built. The conception of extension, motion and the other

attributes of matter can't be the effect of error or prejudice; it must be the work of nature. And the power or faculty through which we acquire those conceptions must be something other than any power of the human mind that has been explained by philosophers up to now, because it isn't sensation and isn't reflection.

I humbly propose this as a decisive test by which the ideal system must stand or fall, settling this argument before it drags on for too long. Either they - our conceptions of the qualities of matter - are ideas of sensation, or they are not. If even one of them can be shown to be an idea of sensation, or to have some slight resemblance to any sensation, I'll lay my hand on my mouth, give up all attempts to reconcile reason with common sense in this matter, and allow the scepticism of the ideal system to triumph. But if they are not ideas of sensation and not like any sensation, then the ideal system is a rope of sand and all the laboured arguments of the skeptical philosophy - against a material world and against the existence of everything but impressions and ideas - are based on a false hypothesis. . . .

All reasoning must be from first principles; and the only reason that can be given for accepting a first principle is that because of how we are constituted we can't help assenting to it. Such principles are as much parts of our constitution as is our power of thinking; reason can't make them or destroy them. And it can't do anything without them: it is like a telescope, which can help a sighted man to see further, but can't show anything to a man who has no eyes. A mathematician can't prove the truth of his axioms, and he can't prove anything else unless he takes his axioms for granted. We can't prove the existence of our minds, or even the existence of our thoughts and sensations. An historian or a witness can't prove anything unless it is taken for granted that memory and the senses can be trusted. A natural philosopher can't prove anything unless it is taken for granted that the course of nature is steady and uniform.

How and when did I first get such first principles, on which I build all my reasoning? I don't know, because I had them further back than I can remember; but I am sure they are parts of my constitution and that I can't discard them. That our thoughts and sensations must have a subject - must be the thoughts and sensations of something - which we call ourself is not, therefore, an opinion acquired through reasoning, but a natural principle. That our sensations of touch indicate something external, extended, shaped, hard or soft, is not something inferred by reason but a natural principle. The belief in it - i.e. in an external material world - and the very conception of it are equally parts of our constitution. If we are deceived about it, we are deceived by God, him who made us, and there is no remedy.