

"A New World: Philosophical Idealism in America, 1700 to 1950"
Lecture I

1. *The response of Samuel Johnson—the American Samuel Johnson—to Berkeley's idealism:* "You will forgive the confusedness of my thoughts and not wonder at my writing like a man something bewildered, since I am, as it were, got into a new world amazed at everything about me. These ideas of ours, what are they?" (Letter to Berkeley, 1729)

2. *Berkeley on returning home, after wandering through the wild mazes of philosophy:* "And although it may, perhaps, seem an uneasy reflexion to some, that when they have taken a circuit through so many refined and unvulgar notions, they should at last come to think like other men: yet, methinks, this return to the simple dictates of Nature, after having wandered through the wild mazes of philosophy, is not unpleasant. It is like coming home from a long voyage: a man reflects with pleasure on the many difficulties and perplexities he has passed through, sets his heart at ease, and enjoys himself with more satisfaction for the future." (*Three Dialogues*, Preface)

3. *The Diminished Reality of Body and the Fundamental Reality of Mind. Plato on the battle of gods and giants.*

STRANGER: One party is trying to drag everything down to earth out of heaven and the unseen, literally grasping rocks and trees in their hands, for they lay hold upon every stock and stone and strenuously affirm that real existence belongs only to that which can be handled and offers resistance to the touch. They define reality as the same thing as body, and as soon as one of the opposite party asserts that anything without a body is real, they are utterly contemptuous and will not listen to another word.

THEAETETUS: The people you describe are certainly a formidable crew. I have met quite a number of them before now.

STRANGER: Yes, and accordingly their adversaries are very wary in defending their position somewhere in the heights of the unseen, maintaining with all their force that true reality consists in certain intelligible and bodiless forms. In the clash of argument they shatter and pulverize those bodies which their opponents wield, and what those others alleged to be true reality they call, not real being, but a sort of moving process of becoming. On this issue an interminable battle is always going on between the two camps. (*Sophist*, in F. M. Cornford's translation. Cornford himself describes the battle as one between "idealists" (the party of the gods) and "materialists" (the party of the giants).)

4. *Plato as representative idealist:* "The first historical system to which the name of idealism is applied by common consent is that of Plato." ("Idealism," in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by James Mark Baldwin)

5. *Josiah Royce on Diminished Reality:* "'The world of dead facts is an illusion. The truth of it is a spiritual life.' This is what philosophical idealism says" (*The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* [1885]). Later, in *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, he borrows a definition of metaphysical idealism from Richard Falckenberg's *Geschichte der Neueren Philosophie* [1886]: "belief in a spiritual principle at the basis of the world, without the reduction of the physical world to a mere illusion."

6. *Time's Subordination to Eternity*

7. *The Displacement of the Senses. Leibniz on his disagreements with Locke:* "Although the author of the *Essay* says hundreds of fine things which I applaud, our systems are very different. His is

closer to Aristotle and mine to Plato. Our disagreements concern points of some importance. There is the question whether the soul in itself is completely blank like a writing table on which nothing has yet been written—a *tabula rasa*—as Aristotle and the author of the *Essay* maintain, and whether everything which is inscribed there comes solely from the senses and experience; or whether the soul inherently contains the sources of various notions and doctrines, which external objects merely rouse up on suitable occasions, as I believe and as do Plato and even the Schoolmen." (*New Essays concerning Human Understanding*)

8. Kant on some of the chief disagreements in the history of philosophy

With regard to the object of all of our rational cognitions, some were merely **sensual philosophers**, others merely **intellectual philosophers**. Epicurus can be called the foremost philosopher of sensibility and Plato that of the intellectual. . . . Those of the first school asserted that reality is in the objects of the senses alone, and that everything else is imagination; those of the second school, on the contrary, said that in the senses there is nothing but semblance, and that only the understanding cognizes that which is true.

With regard to the origin of pure cognitions of reason, whether they are derived from experience or, independent of it, have their source in reason. Aristotle can be regarded as the head of the **empiricists**, Plato that of the **noologists**. Locke, who in recent times followed the former, and Leibniz, who followed the latter (although with sufficient distance from his mystical system), have nevertheless not been able to bring this dispute to any decision. (*Critique of Pure Reason*)

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson on idealism v. materialism

What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. As thinkers, mankind have ever divided into two sects, Materialists and Idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give us representations of things, but what are the things themselves, they cannot tell. The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man; the idealist on the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture. These two modes of thinking are both natural, but the idealist contends that his way of thinking is in higher nature. He concedes all that the other affirms, admits the impressions of sense, admits their coherency, their use and beauty, and then asks the materialist for his grounds of assurance that things are as his senses represent them. But I, he says, affirm facts not affected by the illusions of sense, facts which are of the same nature as the faculty which reports them, and not liable to doubt; facts which in their first appearance to us assume a native superiority to material facts, degrading these into a language by which the first are to be spoken; facts which it only needs a retirement from the senses to discern. ("The Transcendentalist" [1842])

10. William James on rationalism v. empiricism

Historically we find the terms 'intellectualism' and 'sensationalism' used as synonyms of 'rationalism' and 'empiricism.' Well, nature seems to combine most frequently with intellectualism an idealistic and optimistic tendency. Empiricists on the other hand are not uncommonly materialistic, and their optimism is apt to be decidedly conditional and tremulous. Rationalism is always monistic. It starts from wholes and universals, and

makes much of the unity of things. Empiricism starts from the parts, and makes of the whole a collection—is not averse therefore to calling itself pluralistic. Rationalism usually considers itself more religious than empiricism, but there is much to say about this claim, so I merely mention it. It is a true claim when the individual rationalist is what is called a man of feeling, and when the individual empiricist prides himself on being hard-headed. In that case the rationalist will usually also be in favor of what is called free-will, and the empiricist will be a fatalist—I use the terms most popularly current. The rationalist finally will be of dogmatic temper in his affirmations, while the empiricist may be more sceptical and open to discussion. (*Pragmatism* [1907])

11. *James on the tender-minded v. the tough-minded (also from Pragmatism)*

THE TENDER-MINDED

Rationalistic (going by 'principles'),
Intellectualistic,
Idealistic,
Optimistic,
Religious,
Free-willist,
Monistic,
Dogmatical.

THE TOUGH-MINDED

Empiricist (going by 'facts'),
Sensationalistic,
Materialistic,
Pessimistic,
Irreligious,
Fatalistic,
Pluralistic,
Sceptical.

To the first column we might add, "like a hedgehog," and to the second column, "like a fox."

11. **Correspondence.** "In every form of material manifestation, there is a corresponding form of human thought, so that the human mind is as wide in its range of thought as the physical universe which it thinks. The two are wonderfully matched." (Benjamin Peirce)

12. **Axiological idealism.** "Emerson was not a technical scholar, yet no one in this country stood more warmly, more luminously, more whole-heartedly for the deepest convictions of idealistic philosophy: he believed in the freedom of man and in the absolute value of man's ideals" (Hugo Münsterberg, *Science and Idealism* [1906]). "In ethics," idealism is exemplified "by all those views that locate the end of human beings in something higher than the satisfaction of sensual desire and selfish needs" (Richard Falckenberg, *Geschichte der Neueren Philosophie*).

13. *The young Jonathan Edwards on his plans . . .*

The world will expect more modesty because of my circumstances—in America, young, etc. Let there be a superabundance of modesty, and though perhaps 'twill otherwise be needless, it will wonderfully make way for its reception in the world. Mankind are by nature proud and exceeding envious, and ever jealous of such upstarts; and it exceedingly irritates and affronts 'em to see 'em appear in print. Yet the modesty ought not to be affected and foolish, but decent and natural. (Scientific and Philosophical Writings, p. 193)

Before I venture to publish in London, to make some experiment in my own country; to play at small games first, that I may gain some experience in writing. First to write letters to some in England, and to try my [hand in] lesser matters before I venture in great. (p. 194)

If I publish these propositions that are so metaphysical that 'tis probable will be very strange to many learned divines and philosophers, to propound 'em only by way of question, as modestly as possible, and the reasons for 'em; not as if I thought them anything well

demonstrated, but only as worthy to bring the matter into consideration. Entirely submit 'em to the learned . . . and if it be possible, to conceal my determination. (p. 194)

To bring in those things that are very much out of the way of the world's thinking as little as possible in the beginning of a treatise. It won't do, for mayhap it will give an ill prejudice and tincture to the readers' mind in reading the treatise. (p. 195)

14. . . . *and the young George Berkeley on his*

I am young, I am an upstart, I am vain, very well. I shall Endeavour patiently to bear up under the most vilifying appellations the pride & rage of man can devise. (Notebooks 465)

I imagine whatever doctrine contradicts vulgar and settled opinion had need been introduced with great caution into the world. For this reason it was I omitted all mention of the non-existence of matter in the title-page, dedication, preface, and introduction, that so the notion might steal unawares on the reader, who possibly would never have meddled with a book that he had known contained such paradoxes. (Letter to Percival, 1710)

15. *Some of Edwards's statements of idealism*

Nothing has existence anywhere else but in consciousness. No, certainly nowhere else, but either in created or uncreated consciousness. ("Of Being," p. 204 in *Scientific and Philosophical Works*)

Those beings which have knowledge and consciousness are the only proper and real and substantial beings, inasmuch as the being of other things is only by these. From hence we may see the gross mistake of those who think material things the most substantial beings, and spirits more like a shadow; whereas spirits only are properly substances. ("Of Being," p. 206)

The substance of bodies at least becomes either nothing, or nothing but the Deity acting in that particular manner in those parts of space where he thinks fit. So that, speaking most strictly, there is no proper substance but God himself (we speak at present with respect to bodies only). ("Of Atoms," p. 215)

How truly then is it in him that we love, move and have our being. ("Of Atoms," p. 216)

Nothing else has a proper being but spirits, and . . . bodies are but the shadow of being. ("The Mind," p. 337)

We have . . . shewn that all existence is mental, that the existence of all exterior things is ideal. ("The Mind," p. 341)

Though we suppose that the existence of the whole material universe is absolutely dependent on idea, yet we may speak in the old way, and as properly and truly as ever. ("The Mind," p. 353)

That there is no such thing as material substance truly and properly distinct from all those that are called sensible qualities. ("Notes on Knowledge and Existence [Rough notes on his idealism]," p. 398)

How real existence depends on knowledge or perception. ("Notes," p. 398)

16. *Argument 1: why is there something rather than nothing?*

That there should absolutely be nothing at all is utterly impossible. The mind can never, let it stretch its conceptions ever so much, bring itself to conceive of a state of perfect nothing. It puts the mind into mere convulsion and confusion to endeavor to think of such a state, and it contradicts the very nature of the soul to think that it should be; and it is the greatest contradiction, and the aggregate of all contradictions, to say that there should not be. 'Tis true we can't so distinctly show the contradiction by words, because we cannot talk about it without speaking horrid nonsense and contradicting ourselves at every word, and because "nothing" is that whereby we distinctly show other particular contradictions. But here we are run up to our first principle, and have no other to explain the nothingness or not being of nothing by. Indeed, we can mean nothing else by "nothing" but a state of absolute contradiction. And if any many thinks that he can think well enough how there should be nothing, I'll engage that what he means by "nothing" is as much something as anything that ever [he] thought in his life; and I believe that if he knew what nothing was it would be intuitively evident to him that it could not be. (p. 9 in the *Reader*)

A state of absolute nothing is a state of absolute contradiction. Absolute nothing is the aggregate of all the absurd contradictions in the world, a state wherein there is neither body, nor spirit, nor space: neither empty space nor full space, neither little nor great, narrow nor broad, neither infinitely great space not finite space, nor a mathematical point; neither up nor down, neither north nor south (I don't mean as it is with respect to the body of the earth or some other great body, but no contrary points nor positions nor directions); no such thing as either here or there, this way and that way, or only one way. When we go about to form an idea of perfect nothing we must shut out all of these things. We must shut out of our minds both space that has something in it, and space that has nothing in it. We must not allow ourselves to think of the least part of space, never so small, nor must we suffer our thoughts to take sanctuary in a mathematical point. When we go to expel body out of our thoughts, we must be sure not to leave empty space in the room of it; and when we go to expel emptiness from our thoughts we must not think it squeeze it out by anything close, hard and solid, but we must think of the same thing that the sleeping rocks dream of; and not till then shall we get a complete idea of nothing. (p. 13 in the *Reader*)

There is such a thing as nothing with respect to this ink and paper. There is such a thing as nothing with respect to you and me. There is such a thing as nothing with respect to this globe of earth, and with respect to this created universe. There is another way besides these things having existence. But there is no such thing as nothing with respect to entity or being, absolutely considered. And we don't know what we say, if we say we think it possible in itself that there should not be entity. (p. 13 in the *Reader*)

17. *Argument 2: the inevitability of space*

Space is this necessary, eternal, infinite and omnipresent being. We find that we can with ease conceive how all other things should not be. We can remove them out of our minds, and place some other in the room of them; but space is the very thing that we can never remove and conceive of its not being. If a man would imagine space anywhere to be

divided, so as there should be nothing between the divided parts, there remains space between notwithstanding, and so the man contradicts himself. And it is self-evident, I believe, to every man, that space is necessary, eternal, infinite and omnipresent. But I had as good speak plain: I have already said as much as that space is God. And it is indeed clear to me, that all the space there is not proper to body, all the space there is without the bounds of the creation, all the space there was before the creation, is God himself. And nobody would in the least stick at it, if it were not because of the gross conceptions that we have of space. ("Of Being," p. 203)

Space, as has been already observed is a necessary being (if it may be called a being); and yet we have also shewn that all existence is mental, that the existence of all exterior things is ideal. Therefore it is a necessary being only as it is a necessary idea—so far as it is a simple idea that is necessarily connected with other simple exterior ideas, and is, as it were, their common substance or subject. It is in the same manner a necessary being, as anything external is a being. ("The Mind," p. 341)

18. *Argument 3: cognitivism and its elaboration*

And how it doth grate upon the mind, to think that something should be from all eternity, and nothing all the while be conscious of it. Let us suppose, to illustrate it, that the world had a being from all eternity, and had many great changes and wonderful revolutions, and all the while nothing knew; there was no knowledge in the universe of any such thing. How is it possible to bring the mind to imagine? Yea, it is really impossible it should be, that anything should be, and nothing know it. Then you'll say, if it be so, it is because nothing has any existence anywhere else but in consciousness. No, certainly nowhere else, but either in created or uncreated consciousness. ("Of Being," pp. 203-4)

For in what respect has anything had a being, when there is nothing conscious of its being . . . Thus for instance, supposing a room in which none is, none sees the things in the room, no created intelligence: the things in the room have no being any other way than only as God is conscious [of them]; for there is no color there, neither is there any sound, nor any shape. (*Miscellanies*, entry pp)

That which truly is the substance of all bodies is the infinitely exact and precise and perfectly stable idea in God's mind, together with his stable will that the same shall gradually be communicated to us, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exactly established methods and laws: or in somewhat different language, the infinitely exact and precise divine idea, together with an answerable, perfectly exact, precise and stable will with respect to correspondent communications to created minds, and effects on their minds. ("The Mind," p. 344)

The existence of things . . . that are not actually in created minds, consists only in power, or in the determination of God that such and such ideas shall be raised in created minds upon such conditions. ("The Mind," p. 355)

Since all material existence is only idea, this question may be asked: In what sense may those things be said to exist which are supposed, and yet are in no actual idea of any created minds? I answer, they exist only in uncreated idea. But how do they exist otherwise than they did from all eternity, for they always were in uncreated idea and divine appointment? I answer, they did exist from all eternity in uncreated idea, as did everything else and as they do at present, but not in created idea. But, it may be asked,

how do those things exist which have an actual existence, but of which no created mind is conscious—for instance the furniture of this room when we are absent and the room is shut up and no created mind perceives it—how do these things exist? I answer, there has been in times past such a course and succession of existences that these things must be supposed to make the series complete, according to divine appointment of the order of things; and there will be innumerable things consequential which will be out of joint—out of their constituted series—without the supposition of these. ("The Mind," pp. 356-7)

19. *Argument 4: the nature of truth*

Truth, in general, may be defined after the most strict and metaphysical manner: "the consistency and agreement of our ideas with the ideas of God." I confess this, in ordinary conversation, would not have so much tend to enlighten one in the meaning of the word as to say, "the agreement of our ideas with the things as they are"; but it should be inquired, what is it for our ideas to agree with things as they are. . . . Truth as to external things, is the consistency of our ideas with those ideas or that train and series of ideas, that are raised in our minds according to God's stated order and law. Truth as to abstract ideas is the consistency of our ideas with themselves, as when our idea of a circle, or a triangle, or any of their parts, is agreeable to the idea we have stated and agreed to call by the name of a circle, or a triangle. . . . *Corol. 1.* Hence we see in how strict a sense it may be said, that God is truth itself. . . . *Corol. 2.* Hence it appears that truth consists in having perfect and adequate ideas of thing. . . . *Corol. 3.* Hence certainty is the clear perception of this perfection. ("The Mind," p. 342)

Concerning a two-fold ground of assurance of the judgment: a reducing things to an identity or contradiction as in mathematical demonstrations, and by a natural invincible inclination to a connection, as when we see any effect, to conclude a cause; an opposition to believe a thing can begin to be without a cause. This is not the same with the other and cannot be reduced to a contradiction. ("Subjects to be Handled in the Treatise on the Mind," p. 388)

20. *Argument 5: seeking a space-filling attribute, or "that idea that filled space"* ("The Mind," p. 361)

21. *The voluntarist argument*

For what idea is that which we call by the name of body? I find color has the chief share in it. 'Tis nothing but color, and figure which is the termination of this color, together with some powers such as the power of resisting, and motion, etc., that wholly makes up what we call body. And if that which we principally mean by the thing itself cannot be said to be in the thing itself, I think nothing can be. If color exists not out of the mind, then nothing belonging to body exists out of the mind but resistance, which is solidity, and the termination of this resistance with its relations, which is figure, and the communication of this resistance from space to space, which is motion, though the latter are nothing but modes of the former. There, there is nothing out of the mind but resistance. ("The Mind," p. 351)

There is no reason in the nature of the thing itself why a body, when set in motion, should stop at such limits more than at any other. It must therefore be some arbitrary, active and voluntary being that determines it. (p. 378)

The reason why it is so exceedingly natural to men to suppose that there is some latent substance, or something that is altogether hid, that upholds the properties of bodies, is because all see at first sight that the properties of bodies are such as need some cause that shall very moment have influence to their continuance, as well as a cause of their first existence. All therefore agree that there is something that is there, and upholds these properties; and it is must true, there undoubtedly is. But men are wont to content themselves in saying merely that it is something; but that "something" is he by whom all things consist. (p. 380)

22. *Continuous creation*

Since, as has been shewn, body is nothing but an infinite resistance in some part of space caused by the immediate exercise of divine power, it follows that as great and as wonderful a power is every moment exerted in the upholding of the world, as at first was to the creation of it; the first creation being only the continuation or the repetition of this power every moment to cause this resistance. So that the universe is created out of nothing every moment; and if it were not for our imaginations, which hinder us, we might see that wonderful work performed continually, which was seen by the morning stars when they sang together. ("Things to be Considered and Written Fully About," pp. 241-2)

The mere exertion of a new thought is a certain proof of God. For certainly there is something that immediately produces and upholds that thought; here is a new thing, and there is a necessity of a cause. It is not antecedent thoughts, for they are vanished and gone; they are past, and what is past is not. But if we say 'tis the substance of the soul (if we mean that there is some substance besides that thought, that brings that thought forth), if it be God, I acknowledge; but if there be meant something that has no properties, it seems to me absurd. If the removal of all properties, such as extendedness, solidity, thought, etc. leaves nothing, it seems to me that no substance is anything but them; for if there by anything besides, there might remain something when these are removed. (*Miscellanies* 267)

23. *The parity objection, and Edwards's tough-minded biting of the bullet*

"To act consistently, you must either admit matter or reject spirit." (Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*)

MATERIAL SUBSTANCE. Answer to that objection, that then we have no evidence of immaterial substance.

Answer: True; for this is what is supposed, that all existence is perception. What we call body is nothing but a particular mode of perception; and what we call spirit is nothing but a composition and series of perceptions, or an universe of coexisting and successive perceptions connected by such wonderful methods and laws. (Edwards, "Notes," p. 398)