

## 54 THE EXAMINED LIFE: ADVANCED PHILOSOPHY FOR KIDS

period of intense philosophical reflection on human knowledge. Descartes' answer to the basic question of knowledge, that certainty derives from the self and how we experience and understand our ideas, was deemed inadequate by many of his philosophical successors, primarily John Locke (1632–1704), who as an empiricist insisted that the materials of knowledge originated from outside the mind and were processed and made meaningful by the mind.

George Berkeley, usually referred to as Bishop Berkeley (he was a prelate in the Anglican church), continued to think about knowledge along these lines. In a work entitled *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley extended Locke's empiricism in an unusual and distinctive direction. Few philosophers after Plato wrote dialogues since they did not want to be seen as trying to compete with Plato in expressing difficult ideas in a literary form of which the great Greek master was the exemplar. Berkeley is an exception, however, and in this work he presents a series of short dialogues between two fictional characters with etymologically significant names: "Hylas" is from the Greek for "matter" while "Philonous," also Greek, means "lover of mind or spirit." Thus, the dialogues record a conversation between, in essence, matter (Hylas) and spirit (Philonous). The three excerpts cited below present key representative statements of Berkeley's overall position.

### Preliminary Discussion

Pose the question: "If a tree falls in the forest with no one around, does it make a sound?" As noted above, this question may seem banal, but my experience has been that students nonetheless find it fascinating, with discussion of the question quickly becoming energetic and, at times, somewhat heated. Have the students dis-



cuss their answers and allow discussion to continue for a few minutes, inviting students to critique the reasons given by those arguing for each side of the issue. Then, conclude this discussion by wondering out loud whether there might be a third answer to this question, an answer other than yes or no. (There is such an answer, as we shall see.)

Now, modify the original question by posing the following variation: "Does a tree in the forest continue to exist if no one is around to see it?" The typical response is immediate and forceful—"Of course the tree continues to exist!" Young students believe they discern a clear distinction between (a) the existence of the tree when no one is around and (b) the sound a tree might—or might not—make if it falls when no one is around. The existence of the tree is more fundamental than a sound the tree might make. Therefore, existence is less dependent upon a human observer than sound. In fact, students nearly always assert that the

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