Locke and Berkeley at Twenty Paces

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Does the world exist? Or more properly questioned, does anything of the world exist beyond our ideas of it? Locke and Berkeley have become seconds at twenty paces on this dichotomy, and we are asked to consider the outcome of the duel.

Locke chooses to arm his principal with experience, and to assert that there are some things about things that just are...that exist. Period. Primary qualities, much like the roundness of a musket ball, merely await discovery—unknown but not unreal. But Locke decides that such a world could not explain all things—that in fact some things exist as ideas and not as objects. Secondary qualities, much like the heat of a muzzle flash, and perhaps even the pain of an entrance wound, are characters of the mind, and vary with each hand that pulls a trigger or each whose fate is met on fields of honor. But they are real and they reflect real things.

Berkeley finds this all too...real. He arms his principal with idealism. A musket ball is only an idea. Its weight and mass are ideas, as is its muzzle velocity, its trajectory, and its impact energy—all ideas. The world, with all its dangers and inconsistencies, is a mental state. Were we not here, musket balls hurtling through the air would have no existence and certainly no meaning.

That is all well and good, but for the inconvenient fact that we are here. And this notion that all is idealism must now deal with that very testy Mr. Burr, twenty paces hence and much exercised with Mr. Hamilton over the recent unpleasantness in the race for Governor of New York. Mr. Hamilton, with Berkeley as his second, has fired into the air, as all of this is but an idea.

Mr. Burr, seconded by Locke, has drawn aim.

Mr. Hamilton is about to become a realist.

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*John Locke (1632-1704) propounded a theory of realism in which some qualities of the world exist independently of perception and the mind. George Berkeley (1685-1753) advocated a theory of idealism holding that the world and all its qualities are perceptions of the mind with no independent existence otherwise.*