

# Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W-03  
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Berkeley

Reminder: Papers are due next Tuesday

# I. Recapitulation

- Last week, we discussed Locke's primary/secondary distinction.
- Locke proposes that we can have knowledge of the external world on the basis of sense experience.
- We just have to be careful to distinguish our veridical ideas from misrepresentative ones.
- Locke's account of our knowledge relied on a doctrine of abstract ideas, which allows us to form general ideas by abstracting from our particular sense experience.
- I also mentioned that Berkeley thinks that there are two problems with Locke's doctrine.
- One problem arises from Locke's use of abstract ideas.
- The other problem is that we experience, properly speaking, only our sensations, and not the objects as they are in themselves.
- Berkeley's solution to these problems is to deny that there is a material world.
- Questions?

## **II. Berkeley's arguments for idealism**

# Berkeley's idealism

Esse is percipi.

- Esse is percipi means being is perception.
- For Berkeley, there are perceptions, and perceivers.
- Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley all agree that secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind.
- Berkeley extends the point.
- We perceive only the perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them.
- So, we have no knowledge of the material world.

# Three Arguments

- Locke and Berkeley disagree over the status of our ideas about primary qualities.
- Locke argues that they represent, and resemble, material objects.
- Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.
- Berkeley provides three arguments to show that primary qualities are in the mind:
  - ▶ 1. From the sensibility of objects
  - ▶ 2. The extended Lockean arguments
  - ▶ 3. A reductive argument

# III. The argument from the sensibility of objects

- Berkeley's argument from the sensibility of objects starts with the definition of 'sensible object'.
- First dialogue, pp 117-120, using heat as an example of a particular sensible quality.
  - ▶ 1. Objects are sensible things.
  - ▶ 2. Sensible things are things with sensible qualities.
  - ▶ 3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.
  - ▶ 4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.
  - ▶ So, objects are strictly mental, i.e. there is no physical world.

# Problems with the argument from sensibility

- This argument is not valid, as it stands.
- You might take some time to find the problems with it.
- I think it fairly represents Berkeley's intentions though.
- Remember, the empiricist claim is that all we know must originally come in through the senses.

# IV. Berkeley's Lockean arguments

- The Lockean arguments demonstrate, for each supposedly primary quality, that it is really a secondary quality.
- I call these arguments Lockean because Berkeley uses Locke's principles for distinguishing veridical from misrepresenting ideas against him.
- The disagreement between Berkeley and Locke is over metaphysics, not methodology.



# Locke's principles

The use of the following principles characterizes a Lockean argument:

- P1: If some quality of an object appears different to two or more people (or to one person in two or more different states) then that quality is merely mental.
  - ▶ Remember the hot and cold water experiment.
- P2: If the quality appears the same to every one, then it is a real property of the object.
  - ▶ Locke uses the example of the sphere.

# Berkeley presents arguments against the secondary properties

- Hylas and Philonous run through the secondary properties, pp 120-4.
- In this portion of Berkeley's argument, he does not disagree with Locke.
- Berkeley's Lockean argument against the primary qualities is that P2 is never fulfilled.
- There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.
- He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties: number, extension, shape, motion, solidity

# V. Berkeley's Lockean argument against number...

...does not appear in the *Three Dialogues*

- That number is entirely the creature of the mind, even though the other qualities be allowed to exist without, will be evident to whoever considers that the same thing bears a different denomination of number as the mind views it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch. Number is so visibly relative, and dependent on men's understanding, that it is strange to think how any one should give it an absolute existence without the mind. We say one book, one page, one line, etc.; all these are equally units, though some contain several of the others. And in each instance, it is plain, the unit relates to some particular combination of ideas arbitrarily put together by the mind. (*Principles*, §12)

# The variability of number

- Consider what number we might apply to a deck of cards.
- It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.
- The number correctly applied to the object varies as we think of the object in different ways.
- It may be a property of a concept, rather than of an object.

# VI. Berkeley's Lockean argument against extension, pp 124-5

Consider the mite, a tiny insect.

- What appears large to one perceiver can appear tiny to another.
- The size of an object is relative to perceiver, just as the color or taste is.
- I appear large to the mite, but to a giant, I appear small.
- Thus extension is a secondary property, too.
- This example is of utmost importance, since extension is the most plausible primary quality.

# A response to the Lockean argument against extension

- If there is an objective fact about my extension which is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument fails.
- The mite, the giant, and I can all agree that I am six feet tall.
- The correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver.

# Berkeley can defend his argument against extension.

- The scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.
- A yard was originally defined as the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.
- There used to be an actual standard meter bar, against which all other meters could be measured.
- Now, we use the distance light travels in a specific period of time, since the speed of light is supposedly a constant.
- See the website for links to interesting histories of measurement.
- But even these more objective measures do not solve the problem.

# What if the scale of measurement were to vary?

- What if we awoke tomorrow and found that everything had doubled in size.
- We would have no way of discovering this fact.
- Dilations and restrictions could in fact happen all of the time, without us knowing!
- We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.
- Extension does seem to be a secondary quality, according to the Lockean principles.



# VII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against shape, p 125

Consider what we see under a microscope.

- Straight edges will appear as jagged.
- Berkeley had used the microscope to argue against the reality of color, on pp 122-3.
- In Berkeley's favor, consider that the rectangular table is never really sensed as a rectangle.
  - ▶ The shape is inferred.

# VIII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against motion, pp 125-6

Consider how motion varies with the succession of our ideas.

- Take motion as the reciprocal of time, the change in an objects position over time.
- If our ideas proceed more quickly, the motion will appear more slow.

# IX. Berkeley's Lockean argument against solidity, p 126

- Berkeley considers solidity as resistance to touch.
- A strong person will find something soft that a weaker person will find hard.
- This is even more plausible if we consider giants and mites again.
- Hylas grants that hard and soft are relative to the perceiver, but says that the causes of these are not relative.
- Philonous responds that the causes are not perceived.

# Locke, on imperceptible causes

- The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas, existing in the bodies themselves. They are, in the bodies we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us: and what is sweet, blue, or warm in idea, is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the *insensible* parts, in the bodies themselves, which we call so (Locke's *Essay*, Book II, Chapter VIII, 15; emphasis added).
- Locke says that the secondary qualities arise from the impulse of insensible parts of matter on our senses.
- But, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.
- We can not sense that which is insensible!

# **X. Berkeley's reductive argument against the primary qualities**

- We have seen two of Berkeley's three arguments for idealism.
- The first was from the sensibility of objects.
- The second was the extended Lockean argument.
- Berkeley provides a last, and direct, argument that the primary qualities reduce to secondary properties, p 127.

# The reductive argument, in the *Principles*, §10

- Now, if it be certain that those original qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire any one to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moving, but I must withal give it some color or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where therefore the other sensible qualities are, there must these be also, to wit, in the mind and nowhere else.

# The reductive argument

1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.
2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.
3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.  
So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

- Locke thinks that our ideas of primary qualities resemble properties of material objects.
- But, for Berkeley, Locke makes an illegitimate inference to the cause of his ideas from the ideas themselves.
- There is no primary/secondary distinction, since all qualities are secondary.

# XI. Accounting for Locke's materialist error

- Locke is a nominalist about the secondary qualities, but a realist about the primary qualities.
- Our Ideas of primary qualities, like extension, correspond to real properties of real, material objects.
- But those ideas do not correspond to particular sensations.
- We experience an extended chair, say, but not extension itself.
- We have to strip away the other qualities in our minds to get to the new and abstract idea of extension.
- For Locke, ideas of primary qualities all arise from abstraction, as do mathematical ideas.



# Abstract ideas

Berkeley thinks that the doctrine of abstract ideas leads Locke to paradoxes and inconsistencies.

- Recall Locke's doctrine.
- The process of abstraction leads us from particular sensations to ideas of bodies.
- Locke argues that 'bodies' stands for an abstract idea of bodies, which corresponds to bodies, which are physical objects.
- If, on the other hand, we can not form an abstract idea of bodies, then there is no reason to claim that there are any bodies.
- The term 'bodies' is, Berkeley says, empty.
- The same process of reasoning applies to terms for individual bodies, like 'apple' and for other general terms, like 'physical object,' 'the physical world,' and 'the universe'.

## **XII. Two kinds of abstraction**

There are two kinds of processes which might be called abstraction, p 127.

- A1: Considering one property of an object independently of others.
- For example, we can consider the blackness of a chair, apart from its size, or shape, or texture.
- Or, the taste of an apple, apart from its crunchiness, or color.
- We can just focus on one of the sensations that is bundled together with the others.

# Berkeley on A1

- It is agreed on all hands that the qualities or modes of things do never really exist each of them apart by itself, and separated from all others but are mixed, as it were, and blended together, several in the same object. But, we are told, the mind being able to consider each quality singly, or abstracted from those other qualities with which it is united, does by that means frame to itself abstract ideas. For example, there is perceived by sight an object extended, colored, and moved: this mixed or compound idea the mind resolving into its simple, constituent parts, and viewing each by itself, exclusive of the rest, does frame the abstract ideas of extension, color, and motion. Not that it is possible for color or motion to exist without extension; but only that the mind can frame to itself by abstraction the idea of color exclusive of extension, and of motion exclusive of both color and extension (Berkeley, §7 of the introduction to the *Principles*).

# Berkeley on the second kind of abstraction, A2

- Again, the mind having observed that in the particular extensions perceived by sense there is something common and alike in all, and some other things peculiar, as this or that figure or magnitude, which distinguish them one from another; it considers apart or singles out by itself that which is common, making thereof a most abstract idea of extension, which is neither line, surface, nor solid, nor has any figure or magnitude, but is an idea entirely prescinded from all these. So likewise the mind, by leaving out of the particular colors perceived by sense that which distinguishes them one from another, and retaining that only which is common to all, makes an idea of color in abstract which is neither red, nor blue, nor white, nor any other determinate color. And, in like manner, by considering motion abstractedly not only from the body moved, but likewise from the figure it describes, and all particular directions and velocities, the abstract idea of motion is framed; which equally corresponds to all particular motions whatsoever that may be perceived by sense (Berkeley, §8 of the introduction to the *Principles*).

# A2: Forming an actual abstract, general idea.

- For example, Locke would claim that we can have an idea of blackness, or of color.
- Even the idea chair is an abstract, general idea.
- Berkeley insists that we have no ability A2, p 127.

# Berkeley's master argument against abstract ideas

In the Introduction to the *Principles*, he responds directly to Locke's claim that an abstract idea of triangle corresponds to all different kinds of triangles:

- If any man has the faculty of framing in his mind such an idea of a triangle as is here described, it is in vain to pretend to dispute him out of it, nor would I go about it. All I desire is that the reader would fully and certainly inform himself whether he has such an idea or no. And this, methinks, can be no hard task for anyone to perform. What more easy than for anyone to look a little into his own thoughts, and there try whether he has, or can attain to have, an idea that shall correspond with the description that is here given of the general idea of a triangle, which is “neither oblique nor rectangle, equilateral, equicrural nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once?” (Berkeley, §13 of the introduction to the *Principles*)

# More on Berkeley's master argument against abstract ideas

- No idea of a triangle, no picture in our minds, could have all these properties.
- Similarly, we can not have an idea of chair, because it would have to apply to all chairs.
- Some chairs are black, others are blue, green, etc.
- An idea which corresponds to all of these is impossible.
- No image will do as the idea of man.
- For, it would have to be an image of a short man and a tall man, of a hairy man, and of a bald man.

# A1 and A2

- We can use general terms, if we wish, according to A1.
- We should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some thing.
- We should think with the learned and speak with the vulgar.
- Only particulars, single discrete sensations, exist.
- In sum, we have no ability A2.
- A1 is unobjectionable.
- But A1 will not lead to beliefs in a material world.



# Everything is particular.

- Since we can not abstract, we have no abstract ideas; we can not have ideas of material objects.
- Our ordinary ideas of these objects are actually collections of particular sensations, p 127.
- The particular sensations (e.g. the feel of the apple, its taste, and odor) are all things we know about.
- But all we have is this passing show, our experiences of the particulars.
- All our ideas are ideas of particulars.
- Thus, we can see that A1 is really not a process of abstraction at all.
- It is just the recognition of the separate ideas of sensation, and their independence.

# XIII. Berkeley's world

- We have a bundle of sensations which form an experience which we call a red chair, say, or apple.
- We use the term 'apple' to refer to this collection of (strictly speaking distinct) sensory ideas.
- 'Apple', or even 'this apple', does not correspond to any abstract idea of apple, or of red, or of sweet, etc.
- The names 'apple' and 'chair' and 'red' are just convenient labels, and should not indicate any existence of the apple or chair or color beyond my current experience of it.
- If 'chair' actually referred to a thing, it would have to refer to red chairs and blue chairs and tall chairs and short chairs.
- We can give a name to commonalities among particular sensations, but this is just a name.
- Berkeley is thus a nominalist about everything except particular experiences.
- We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter, as all are abstractions.

# Berkeley, against Locke and Descartes

- Locke and Descartes posit matter as the cause of our ideas.
- This matter really has only the primary qualities as properties.
- But on this picture, there is no yellow, no sweetness: all secondary properties are just names.
- Berkeley tries making the terms refer to my sensory states.
- The lemon is yellow, since I really have a yellow sensory experience.
- Berkeley's account solves the problem of error for our beliefs based on the senses, like the water experiment.
- This is the problem that led both Descartes and Locke to reject the resemblance hypothesis for ideas of secondary qualities.
- But Berkeley has a new set of problems.

# XVI. Intersubjectivity and persistence

- One of Berkeley's new problems is the problem of intersubjectivity.
- How do we account for different people having similar experiences?
- Similarly, how do we account for the fact that objects do not seem to go in and out of existence, that they seem to persist?
- Berkeley posits God, to ensure both intersubjectivity and persistence.
- On a metaphoric level, our experiences are like peering into the mind of God.

# What happens to ideas when we are not perceiving them?

- They may subsist in the mind of other spirits.
- But what if no person is perceiving them?
- Sensible things have to be perceived.
- But it does not follow that they are frequently created and annihilated.

# The limerick

There was a young man who said God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
When he finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the quad.

Dear sir, your confusion is odd.  
I am always about in the quad.  
And that's why this tree  
will continue to be,  
Since observed by,  
yours faithfully,  
God.

# XVII. Berkeley, the resemblance hypothesis, and God

- Berkeley accepts the resemblance hypothesis, in a way.
- Locke used the resemblance hypothesis as support for his materialism, for his view that material objects are the causes of our ideas.
- Obviously, Berkeley does not follow Locke in this way.
- Consider two different refinements of the resemblance hypothesis.
  - (RH1): My ideas resemble material objects.
  - (RH2): My ideas resemble their causes.
- Berkeley rejects RH1, but accepts RH2.
- So, what are these causes, if they are not material objects?
- Ideas can only resemble other ideas, p 134.
- Thus, Berkeley infers the existence of God, p 136.

# XVIII. Common sense, atheism, materialism and skepticism

Berkeley urges that his position is more commonsensical than materialism (and dualism) which leads to atheism and skepticism:

- For, as we have shown the doctrine of matter or corporeal substance to have been the main pillar and support of skepticism, so likewise upon the same foundation have been raised all the impious schemes of atheism and irreligion. Nay, so great a difficulty has it been thought to conceive matter produced out of nothing, that the most celebrated among the ancient philosophers, even of those who maintained the being of a God, have thought matter to be uncreated and co-eternal with Him. How great a friend material substance has been to atheists in all ages were needless to relate. All their monstrous systems have so visible and necessary a dependence on it that, when this corner-stone is once removed, the whole fabric cannot choose but fall to the ground, insomuch that it is no longer worth while to bestow a particular consideration on the absurdities of every wretched sect of atheists. (Berkeley, *Principles*, §92)



# Materialism and atheism

- Materialism makes the world independent of God.
- We claim that our sensations depend on a world of objects.
- This seems to dismiss God from our natural science.
- At least it pushes God out of our explanations.
- Berkeley sees natural scientific explanations as evidence of atheism.

# Materialism and skepticism

- Berkeley says that materialism also entails that we do not experience the objects in themselves.
- We can not get out of our minds into those objects, so we are forced into skepticism.
- All the properties we experience are sensible, and so in us.
- If we posit matter in addition, we can have no knowledge of it.
- This is just the Empiricist's Problem.
- Skepticism and atheism are wrong, says Berkeley.
- Thus, idealism is right.

# Advantages

- Berkeley gets to retain colors, sounds, and smells. Recall 1 and the apple.
- The apple is just how I experience it.
- Remember, he thinks there is a real world.
- It is just not a material world.

# Disadvantages

- The drawback is that we are left with only our mental states.
- Berkeley's world is purely psychological.
- The big question for Berkeley, then, is whether we can get out of our mental states to refer to, or understand, the world, even if it is not a physical world?
- The story about peering into the mind of God can not be taken literally, since the same problem about experiencing sensations and not causes arises here.
- Berkeley could appeal, like Descartes, to the benevolence of God, but this would amount to an abandonment of empiricism.
- The solipsistic picture of Descartes returns.
- We are back to only the cogito.