

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, April 24

I. Berkeley's nominalism

Berkeley extends Locke's nominalism to all properties of objects.

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 a collection of sensory ideas.

It does not correspond to any abstract idea of apple, or of red, or of sweet, etc.

But 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.

The real problem here is the contradiction in Introduction §13.

We can give a name to commonalities among particular sensations, but this is just a name.

Berkeley is a nominalist about everything except particular experiences.

We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter, as all are abstractions.

Matter is an unknown something, §76.

To speak of it is trifling with words, §81.

Compare to Descartes, AT 79-80

II. The Principle of No Good Reason

Remember that Descartes claimed that if the world were Berkeleyan, God would be a deceiver.

Here is an argument that would support Berkeley, against Descartes.

It is an argument for Berkeley's idealism from a Principle of No Good Reason.

The Principle of No Good Reason: God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it.

Corollary: If God does something, there must be a good reason to do it.

1. If God exists, then he can either create physical objects or not create them.
 2. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly. (He has to create *and* preserve, anyway!)
 3. So, there is no good reason for him to create physical objects, in addition to minds.
 4. God exists.
 5. God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it. (The Principle of No Good Reason.)
- So, God will not create physical objects.
God just creates our ideas directly, instead of taking the detour through physical objects.

Note that Berkeley does not present this argument himself, though it is implicit in his work.

The argument is a way to draw a wedge between Descartes and Berkeley.

Descartes and Berkeley agree on the key points.

For example, it relies on the existence of God.

This is no problem here, since Descartes and Berkeley agree on it.

If Descartes could have a clear and distinct understanding of this argument, he would have to give up his beliefs in the physical world.

III. Berkeley, Abstract Ideas and Mathematics

Locke's account of the physical world was his strength.

His account of mathematics was weak.

But, it was weak because of empiricism precepts.

To account for our knowledge of mathematics, Locke relied on an ability to abstract, or generalize, from experience with ordinary objects and inscriptions.

See Locke, §I.1.15.

We abstract the circularity from circular objects.

Instead of trying to provide an empiricist account of mathematics, Berkeley denies that there is any mathematical knowledge.

Berkeley urging that mathematics is useful, but that mathematical terms are empty names, like 'physical object', 'redness', or 'table'.

You might think that Berkeley could make mathematical terms refer to our mental states, make them mental objects, as he does with 'apple', a collection of particular experiences.

But to do so would rely on the same process of abstraction which led us to the error of positing physical objects, §118.

In mathematics, the problems of abstraction are multiplied.

For example, Berkeley thinks infinite divisibility is a paradox, §127.

We think that we can divide an inch into ten thousand parts, because we can use it to represent a much larger segment, as on a map, which does represent the longer length.

But to think that we can divide a finite segment into arbitrarily many segments violates the constraints of the minimum sensibilia, the smallest perceivable segment.

Infinite divisibility was an important element of the new science, because the calculus depends on continuity. That is, the abstraction that Berkeley rejects also serves as the basis for science, for the laws of motion.

Descartes thought these were innate truths.

If these laws were universally valid, then that might serve as an argument for their truth.

And hence for the legitimacy of abstraction.

Berkeley should construe science in a different way, given his empiricism.

But he doesn't, §30-§32.

This sets the stage for Hume, who will show how laws of nature are completely beyond the reach of the empiricist.

IV. Berkeley's world

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.

V. 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.

VI. What happens to ideas when we are not perceiving them?

Read §6.

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, §48.

Consider 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.