

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
Russell Marcus, Instructor
email: philosophy@thatmarcusfamily.org
website: <http://www.thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Mind/MindHome.htm>

Lecture Notes, February 26

I. Abstraction

Berkeley's idealist monism is a response to the materialism of Hobbes and Locke, as well as the materialist element of Descartes' dualism.

In our last class, I mentioned that Locke relied on a process of abstraction to account for our knowledge of general ideas, which include mathematical ideas.

Let us consider this process of abstraction in a bit more detail.

We start with our sense experiences, of several chairs, for example.

We notice that they have common properties: backs, seats, legs.

We give a name to whatever has these common properties.

This name, 'chair', is abstract, in the sense that it doesn't refer to a particular chair.

Instead, it is a general term, which applies to any chair.

The same process yields 'table'.

Now, we can consider the commonalities among tables and chairs, and sofas and desks.

This yields an even more general term, 'furniture'.

We have abstracted again.

The same process which yields 'chair' gives us other terms like 'house' and 'apartment building'.

We can abstract again, from 'house' and 'apartment building' to get 'domicile'.

Similarly, we arrive at names like 'animal', and 'person'.

Animals, persons, domiciles, and furniture are all extended.

We can abstract again from these terms, and arrive at the terms 'extension' and 'physical object'.

We get the term 'motion' by abstracting that property from the things that we see moving.

These ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.

A scientist uses 'motion', for example, when he asserts ' $v = \Delta s / \Delta t$ ', that velocity is equal to the change in displacement over time.

A progression of abstraction leads us from terms for particular sensations to terms that the scientist uses to describe material bodies; see Berkeley's *Introduction*, §7-§9.

All terms are supposed, by Locke, Descartes, and Berkeley, to stand for ideas.

They all hold a representational theory, on which ideas are like pictures in the mind.

Our ideas correspond to external objects, like chairs, people, or even circles.

If sense experience is veridical, then the picture accurately reflects reality; see *Introduction*, §19.

So, consider our term 'bodies'.

The term stands for an abstract idea, 'bodies'.

An idea is a representation of an external object.

So, the term 'bodies' refers to bodies, which are physical objects.

Thus, the materialist explains our knowledge of general terms like 'bodies', even though our sense experience is all of particular bodies.

To account for mathematics, Locke says that we abstract as well.

We abstract the triangularity of triangular-shaped drawings from their specific properties: the chalk, the slight curve in one side, the location on the board.

We ignore some properties and focus on others.

Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas avoids Descartes's claim that we know about the world through the mind alone.

Using abstraction, we can trace all of our uses of general terms, including mathematical ones, to our original sense experiences.

While Hobbes did not discuss abstraction, it is consistent with his materialism, and without an independent, structured mind, full of innate ideas, he needs some such account of our knowledge of general terms.

II. Abstract ideas and materialism

We have seen that Berkeley is an idealist, though we have not yet looked at his arguments.

I also mentioned that Berkeley rejects the primary/secondary distinction, and his arguments against the primary/secondary distinction are central to his idealism.

Berkeley believes that both the primary/secondary distinction and the doctrine of abstract ideas lead to an errant materialism; see *Introduction* §6.

Locke and Descartes are nominalists about secondary qualities, but realists about primary qualities.

Our ideas of primary qualities, like extension, though, 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.

Locke argued that our term 'bodies' stands for an abstract idea, 'bodies', which corresponds to bodies, which are physical objects.

Berkeley argues that we can not form an abstract idea 'bodies', so 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', 'the universe', etc.

There are two kinds of processes which might be called 'abstraction'.

The first is harmless.

Berkeley thinks that the second leads to belief in material objects.

If we can form an abstract idea, then we can have ideas of material objects.

And if we have ideas of material objects, then they correspond to matter; there is a physical world.

But Berkeley denies that we can have these abstract, general ideas; see §4-5, and *Introduction*, §10.

Process 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.

Process A2: Forming an abstract, general idea.

For example, the ideas of blackness and, more generally, of color, would be abstract.

Even the idea 'chair' is an abstract, general idea.

Berkeley's central evidence against our possessing A2 comes in the *Introduction*, §13.

We can not have an idea of 'triangle' since it would have to correspond to equilateral, isosceles, and scalene triangles.

And no idea, 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.

In sum, we have no ability A2.

A1 is unobjectionable, but will not lead to beliefs in a material world.

There are two specific ways in which Berkeley accuses the materialist of misusing A2
(Of course, all uses of A2 will be misuses.)

M1: Abstracting extension from other properties of an object; §10, and *Introduction* §7-10.

M2: Abstracting the extension of an object from our perception of it; §4-6; §11.

Sometimes, as in §5, Berkeley phrases M2 as:

M2*: Abstracting *existence* from perception.

In both cases, the misuse involves thinking that the so-called primary qualities are real properties of external, physical objects.

Since we can not abstract, we can not have ideas of material objects.

We can use general terms, if we wish.

We can think with the learned and speak with the vulgar; §51 (which is not reprinted in Morton).

But by using such terms, we should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some general things.

Since there are no general things, only particulars exist.

These particulars are single discrete sensations.

Consider how many terms are actually general: body, human body, a particular person's body, that person's hand, the fingers on that hand..