Duncan Lowe and Colin Hill Present: BERKLEY'S ATTACK ON ABSTRACT IDEAS

What is an Abstract Idea?

- Berkley defines abstract ideas in his *Principles* simply as "notions of things" (AW, 439).
 - Obtained through the process of abstraction or "the consideration of each quality singly" of an object
- Abstract ideas are the grouping together of similar particulars into one mental image/idea (including all forms of sense perception)

Examples: The abstract idea of a human, tiger triangle, or extension

Locke and Abstract Ideas

• Locke is a firm believer in Abstract Ideas

- Replace Descartes innate ideas in providing for mathematics, the sciences and also provide for primary qualities
- Locke believes abstract ideas are important because without them there are too many particulars for humans to account for and abstract ideas allow individuals to group the particulars of sensible objects
- Further Locke believes there is an important connection between general words and abstract ideas and that "General words function as names for abstract ideas" (Melchert, 390).

Berkley's Argument

- Berkley feels humans generally do not possess the ability to create abstract ideas and that consistently speaking as though we do is an abuse of language
- For him abstract ideas simply go against common sense,
 - "I proceed to examine what can be alleged in defense of the doctrine of abstraction and try if I can discover what it is that inclines the men of speculation to embrace an opinion so remote from common sense as that seems to be" (AW, 441).
- According to Berkley, philosophers belief and "use" of abstract ideas has inhibited further learning
 - "Upon the whole I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have up to now amused philosophers and blocked up the way to knowledge are entirely owing to ourselves - we have raised a dust and then complain we cannot see"(AW, 439).

Berkley's Arguments Continued

 Berkley refutes two claims of abstract idea theorists such as Locke.

#1: It is possible to abstract (independently think about in our mind) properties of an object which cannot be perceived or sensed separately from other properties of the object

#2: That we can form abstract ideas

Berkley's Principal of Legitimate Abstraction

- It is important to note that Berkley does not deny humans' ability to abstract but instead their ability to form abstract ideas
 - "I admit myself able to abstract in one sense, as when I consider some particular parts or qualities separated from others with which, though they are united in some objects, yet it is possible they may really exist without them" (AW, 441).
 - "Can abstract x from y if and only if x can exist unaccompanied by y" (Tlumak, 181).

Argument Against Claim #1

- Berkley rejects claim #1 because it is only possible to abstract something that could exist on its own (Claim #1 runs contrary to Berkley's Principle of Legitimate Abstraction)
 - For example it is not possible to abstract primary qualities from secondary qualities
 - "But I desire anyone 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 move, but I must in addition give it some colors or other sensible qualities 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, these must be also, namely, in the mind and nowhere else." (AW, 449)

Argument Against Claim #2

- Abstract ideas can not exist as each idea of an object is particular
 - "Whereas, in truth, there is no such thing as one precise and definite signification annexed to any general name, they all signifying indifferently a great number of particular ideas."
- Serkley argues that it is not truly possible to form a general abstraction that encompasses the entirety of the ideas of something (humans, apples, triangles), since Berkley feels the cases are "outright self-contradictory" (Tlumak, 181).
 - Can not create an image that encompasses all triangles, tigers, or apples.

Brain Exercise!!

- Try to form a mental abstraction of all "humankind".
- In other words, create a picture in your head that encompasses all that is "humankind".

Is this your abstract idea?



Or is it this?





Who says it has to be a man?



Argument against Claim #2 Continued

 None of you should have been able to an imagine an ideal individual to represent the abstract idea of human kind without giving that individual particular characteristics (short vs tall, woman vs man)

 You were unable to imagine a perfectly generic human so you were unable to form an abstract idea of humankind

General Idea vs. General Abstract Idea

- Berkley's rejection of abstract general ideas does not mean he dismisses the possibility of general ideas
 - "And here it is noted that I do not deny absolutely there are general ideas, but only that there are any abstract general ideas." (AW, 442)
- "Although Berkley rejects Lockean abstract ideas, he doesn't reject general words. But for him, an idea's generality consists not in its own nature but in the use that is made of it" (Tlumak, 181).

Implications

#1 Gives Berkley another means to argue for his idealist, non-material world

- Belief in the material world is largely dependent on individuals ability to abstract

#2 Berkley is left unable to provide for higher human processes such as mathematics and is forced to argue against those portions of the natural sciences which depend on abstract ideas.

- Can't argue mathematics are innate (Descartes) or that humans can use abstraction to develop higher level mathematics (Locke)

Discussion Questions

- After hearing both Locke and Berkley's arguments for the existence of abstract ideas who do you agree with?
 - Can you have general terms without abstract ideas?
- O you buy the arguments of Locke and Berkley or do you have your own reasons for reaching your conclusion?

Obes the fact Berkley's theories led him to argue against calculus as a legitimate part of mathematics when it has subsequently become so important and led to so many breakthroughs influence your opinion of his works? Does this discredit him?