Class 18 - Against Abstract Ideas
Berkeley's *Principles*, Introduction, (AW 438-446); §86-§100 (handout)
Three Dialogues, Second Dialogue (AW 475-484)

I. Substrata, Occasions, and Other Attempts to Infer a Material World

We saw three arguments that Berkeley provides to show that primary qualities are in the mind:

PQ1. From the sensibility of objects
PQ2. From the relativity of perceptions
PQ3. A reductive argument

Despite these arguments, in the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas is resistant to giving up materialism.
He insists, as many of us naturally do, that there must be some external, material object, with some real primary qualities, to support or cause the ideas that we have.

> *Hylas*: I conclude it exists, because qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support (First Dialogue, AW 469b).

For example, Hylas grants Philonous that hard and soft are relative to the perceiver, but insists that the causes of these qualities are not relative.
Hylas and Philonous agree that there is some ultimate cause of everything (call it a first cause or the big bang or God).
They also agree that there are perceptions.
They disagree about whether there are some intermediate causes, between the first cause and our perceptions, which we ordinarily consider to be material objects.
Hylas makes several attempts to characterize an intermediate cause of our perceptions, using several different names.

IC1. Absolute extension (AW 467a)
IC2. Passive object of an active sensation (AW 468a)
IC3. Material substratum (AW 469b)
IC4. External object (as opposed to immediately perceived idea; Caesar example) (AW 472b)
IC5. Causes or occasions in the brain (AW 475a-b)
IC6. Matter, as whatever causes my ideas (AW 479a)
IC7. Instrument (AW 480a)

Philonous responds, in all cases, that such causes are not perceived, and thus that they are not sensible objects.
Absolute extension, IC1, is a general idea, and can neither exist in a particular object nor in our minds.
Our minds are always passive, when sensing, so that the passive object, IC2, is the sensation itself, not an external object.
The material substratum, IC3, is either itself perceivable (as when we think of it as spreading) or imperceivable, in which case it can not be the object of sensation.
The external object, IC4, is not perceived, but inferred using reason or reflection.
The brain itself, IC5, is not (generally) the sensible object in question.
Moreover, taking motion in the brain to be the cause of my ideas leads to the puzzle, that Locke noticed, about why particular conscious experiences are correlated with particular motions in material objects.

> *Philonous*: This way of explaining things...could never have satisfied any reasonable man. What connection is there between a motion in the nerves and the sensations of sound or color in the mind? Or how is it possible these should be the effect of that? (Second Dialogue, AW 476a).

Locke responded skeptically to the problem of explaining the correlations between conscious experiences and their material causes.
Berkeley denies the acceptability of such skepticism, and so denies the existence of material causes.

Perhaps the most interesting of the characterizations that Berkeley ascribes to Hylas, IC6 and IC7, employ a functional definition of matter.

> *Hylas*: I find myself affected with various ideas of which I know I am not the cause; neither are they the cause of themselves or of one another, or capable of subsisting by themselves, as being altogether inactive, fleeting, dependent beings. They have therefore some cause distinct from me and them, of which I pretend to know no more than that it is *the cause of my ideas*. And this thing, whatever it is, I call matter (Second Dialogue, AW 479a).

I call this characterization a functional definition since it defines matter as whatever causes my ideas.
It gives no positive characterization of matter.
It only says that matter is whatever functions as the cause of my ideas.
Philonous responds that only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas, and that an all-powerful God could have no use for an intermediate instrument.
Here is a similar section in the *Principles*.

> Though we do the utmost we can to secure the belief of *matter*, though, when reason forsakes us, we endeavor to support our opinion on the bare possibility of the thing, and though we indulge ourselves in the full scope of an imagination not regulated by reason to make out that poor *possibility*, yet the upshot of all is that there are certain *unknown ideas* in the mind of God; for this, if anything, is all that I conceive to be meant by *occasion* with regard to God. And this at the bottom is no longer contending for the *thing*, but for the *name*. Whether therefore there are such ideas in the mind of God, and whether they may be called by the name *matter*, I shall not dispute. But, if you stick to the notion of an unthinking substance or support of extension, motion, and other sensible qualities, then to me it is most evidently impossible there should be any such thing, since it is a plain repugnancy that those qualities should exist in or be supported by an unperceiving substance (*Principles*, §§75-6).

Descartes, in the Sixth Meditation, had rejected the possibility of a Berkeleyan universe.

> There clearly is in me a passive faculty of sensing, that is, a faculty for receiving and knowing the ideas of sensible things; but I could not use it unless there also existed, either in me or in something else, a certain active faculty of producing or bringing about these ideas...[I]t is in some substance different from me, containing either formally or eminently all the reality that exists objectively in the ideas produced by that faculty...[T]his substance is either a body, that is a corporeal nature, which contains formally all that is contained objectively in the ideas, or else it is God, or some other creature more noble than a body, which contains eminently all that is contained objectively in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is patently obvious that he does not send me these ideas either immediately by himself, or even through the mediation of some creature that contains the objective reality of these ideas not formally but only eminently. For since God has given me no faculty whatsoever for making this determination, but instead has

> given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist (Descartes, *Meditations* AT VII.79-80, AW 64b).

Descartes claims that God's nature (God's goodness), combined with our nature (our perceptions), debars a Berkeleyan, idealistic world.
Berkeley claims that God's nature (God's power and simplicity), combined with our perceptions, debars a Cartesian, material world.

Against Descartes, Berkeley could argue for idealism from a Leibnizian Principle of Sufficient Reason.

BAD BAD1. God does not do anything without sufficient reason.
BAD2. God either created physical objects or did not create them.
BAD3. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly.
BAD4. So, there is no good reason for God to have created physical objects, in addition to minds.
BADC. So, God did not create physical objects. God creates our ideas directly, instead of mediately through physical objects.

Berkeley does not present BAD himself, though it is implicit in his work.
He does insist on BAD3.

> In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now (*Principles* §20, AW 451a).

Descartes says that an argument like BAD is clearly and distinctly unsound.
It is worth a moment to consider what Descartes's precise objection to it could be.
Perhaps Descartes would deny the inference from BAD3 to BAD4.
Instead, he could claim that while the reason is obscure, the clarity and distinctness of my perception of the existence of material objects is sufficient evidence for the existence of a good reason.

I leave it to you to adjudicate the debate between Berkeley and Descartes.
Let's instead return to the disagreement among the empiricists Locke and Berkeley.
The question of whether we can infer the existence of material objects on the basis of our sense perception is a point of their disagreement.
Berkeley is showing that the claim that material objects exist must be an inference, not a perception.
Locke's description of our experiences of primary and secondary qualities makes explicit the danger of relying on such an inference.

> 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, *Essay* §II.VIII.15, AW 334a, emphasis in last line added).

Berkeley is taking advantage of the apparent contradiction in Locke's work between saying, on the one hand, that all knowledge comes from sense experience and, on the other, that we have knowledge of insensible objects.
If we are empiricists, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.
Still, even though Locke and Berkeley reject innate ideas, they both have to admit that we have some ability to reason or infer.
For Locke, our ability to reason is just a natural, psychological capacity to compare, contrast, and abstract.
Locke can argue that the inference to material objects is thus the legitimate result of an ordinary psychological process.

If Berkeley's denial of the existence of a material world were based solely, as he sometimes implies, on our inability to know about such a world, his idealism would be poorly motivated.
But, Berkeley's idealism is more forcefully motivated by his objections to Locke's psychology.
To block Locke's appeal to a psychological argument for a belief in materialism, Berkeley attacks his claims about our mental capacities.
In particular, he claims that Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas is the source of a skeptical, atheistic materialism.

II. The Doctrine of Abstract Ideas

According to Locke, 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 the extension itself.
In order to form the idea of extension in general, or even the extension of a particular chair, we have to strip away the other qualities in our minds to form a new and abstract idea.
For Locke, ideas of primary qualities all arise from abstraction, as do mathematical ideas.
We create general terms to stand for the abstract ideas in our minds.
Our term 'bodies' stands for an abstract idea of bodies, which corresponds to actual material bodies.
The same process of reasoning applies to terms for individual bodies, like 'apple', and to other general terms, like 'physical object', 'the physical world', and 'the universe'.
Berkeley argues that we can not form an abstract idea of body.
The term 'bodies' stands for no idea at all.
Thus, there is no reason to claim that there are any bodies.

There are two kinds of processes which might be called abstraction, and which Berkeley thinks lead to the false belief in material objects.
If we can abstract in either way, 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.

> If we thoroughly examine this tenet [materialism] it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colors, heat and cold, extension and figures - in a word, the things we see and feel - what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions on the sense? And is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part, I might as

> easily divide a thing from itself. I may, indeed, divide in my thoughts, or conceive apart from each other, those things which, perhaps I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus, I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose itself. So far, I will not deny, I can abstract, if that may properly be called *abstraction* which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects as it is possible may really exist or be actually perceived asunder. But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception. Hence, as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it. In truth, the object and the sensation are the same thing and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other (*Principles* §5, AW 447b-445a).

The first kind of abstraction, which is also described in §7 of the Introduction to the *Principles*, involves focusing on one part of an idea.
For example, we can consider the blackness of a chair apart from its size, or shape, or texture.
Or, we can think of 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.

> A1: Considering one property of an object independently of others.

A1 is unobjectionable.
For Berkeley as for Locke, our ordinary ideas of objects are actually collections of independent particular sensations.
The independence of our sensations, recall, supported Locke's response to Molyneux's problem of whether a blind person, given sight, could discriminate by vision the shapes of those objects whose differences he/she knows by touch.
Berkeley considers an apple.

> A certain color, taste, smell, figure and consistency having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things - which as they are pleasing or disagreeable excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth (*Principles* §1, AW 447a).

The particular sensations (e.g. the feel of the apple, its taste, and odor) are all perceivable.
But all we have is this passing show, our experiences of the particulars.
Thus, A1 is really not a process of abstraction at all.
It is just the recognition of the independence of the separate ideas of sensation.
A1 will not lead to beliefs in a material world.

The second kind of abstraction, which Berkeley also describes in §8 of the Introduction, involves creating, in reflection, a positive idea.
Locke claims that we can form ideas of redness and color by abstracting from our visual idea of the apple.

> A2: Forming an abstract, general idea.

Berkeley insists that we have no ability A2.
Consider an abstract idea that corresponds to the general term 'triangle'.
Locke claims that such an idea stands for all triangles, whether scalene, isosceles, or equilateral.
Berkeley denies that any such idea is possible.

> 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 not. And this, methinks, can be no hard task for anyone to perform. What is 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... given [by Locke] 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*? (*Principles*, Introduction §13).

This claim is the core of Berkeley's argument against abstract ideas.
No idea, no picture in our minds, could have all of these properties at once.
An idea of a triangle would be of one particular kind of triangle, not all kinds of triangles.
We can not have an idea of chair, because it would have to apply to all chairs.
Some chairs are black, others are blue, or green.
But an idea of a chair could have only one kind of coloring.
A single idea of all kinds of colorings 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.
Berkeley concludes that Locke's claim that we have a psychological capacity A2 is false.

According to Berkeley, there are two particular kinds of misuses of abstraction.

> When we attempt to abstract extension and motion from all other qualities, and consider them by themselves, we presently lose sight of them, and run into great extravagances. All which depend on a twofold abstraction; first, it is supposed that extension, for example, may be abstracted from all other sensible qualities; and secondly, that the entity of extension may be abstracted from its being perceived (*Principles* §99).

Both of the alleged capacities Berkeley mentions here are misuses of A2.

> M1: Abstracting extension from other properties of an object.
> M2: Abstracting the extension of an object from our perception of it.

Sometimes, Berkeley phrases M2 as:

> M2*: Abstracting *existence* from perception.

Berkeley runs M1 and M2 together, but they seem distinct.
The first is the creation of a new idea on the basis of existing ideas.
The second is the acceptance of a material world independent of any perceivers.
M1 and M2 are similar in that they each involve believing that the so-called primary qualities are real properties of external, physical objects.

Berkeley's claim against both M1 and M2 rests on his denial that we can form a general idea.

> *Philonous*: It is a universally received maxim that *everything which exists is particular*. How then can motion in general, or extension in general, exist in any corporeal substance?
> *Hylas*: I will take time to solve your difficulty.

> *Philonous*: But I think the point may be speedily decided. Without doubt you can tell whether you are able to frame this or that idea. Now I am content to put our dispute on this issue. If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes, as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of.
> *Hylas*: To confess ingenuously, I cannot (First Dialogue, AW 467a-b)

Hylas proposes that mathematicians use abstract ideas.
Similarly, Berkeley, in the *Principles*, considers whether scientists use abstract ideas.
In both cases, we need terms like 'triangle' and 'motion' which stand as universals which refer to various different objects or properties.
Berkeley claims that we can use particular terms generally, without forming abstract ideas.

> A word becomes general by being made the sign, not of an abstract general idea, but of several particular ideas, any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind. For example, when it is said *the change of motion is proportional to the impressed force*, or that *whatever has extension is divisible*, these propositions are to be understood of motion and extension in general, and nevertheless it will not follow that they suggest to my thoughts an idea of motion without a body moved, or any determinate direction and velocity, or that I must conceive an abstract general idea of extension, which is neither line, surface, nor solid, neither great nor small, black, white, nor red, nor of any other determinate color. It is only implied that whatever particular motion I consider, whether it is swift or slow, perpendicular, horizontal, or oblique, or in whatever object, the axiom concerning it holds equally true (*Principles* Introduction §11, AW 442a).

So Berkeley says that we can use general terms, if we wish.
We should be careful not to be misled into thinking that such terms correspond to some things.
Such misuse of language can lead, as Hobbes counseled, to serious errors.
Since we can not abstract, we can not have ideas of material objects; only discrete sensations, exist.

Locke is a nominalist about secondary qualities: terms for color, for example, refer only to my ideas and not to real qualities of external objects.
Berkeley extends Locke's nominalism to all terms for general properties, and even to terms which collect several sensations into an object.
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.
The terms 'apple' and 'chair' and 'red' are convenient labels, but do not indicate the existence of any apple or chair or color beyond my current experiences.
To refer to a thing, 'chair' must 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.

> In such things we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar* (*Principles* §51).

Berkeley is a nominalist about everything except particular experiences.
We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter.
All of those terms are empty abstractions from the only things we can know from experience: our perceptions themselves, the ideas which Descartes observed can not be false.