

**Philosophy 203**  
***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

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**Class #18**  
**Berkeley Against Abstract Ideas**

# Three Main Berkeley Topics

- ✓1. Arguments for idealism against the reality of the primary qualities
  - But there's one more set of arguments to discuss.
- 2. Arguments against abstract ideas
- 3. Accounts of mathematics and science

# An Intermediate Cause of Our Perceptions?

- Berkeley claims that there is no reason to posit anything beyond such objects, aside from their cause, i.e. God.
- Hylas and Philonous agree that there is some ultimate cause of everything.  
First cause? Big bang? 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*: I conclude [the material world] exists, because qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support” (First Dialogue, AW 469b).
- To characterize this intermediate cause, Hylas uses 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) (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)

# Berkeley on Intermediate Causes

IC1. Absolute extension  
IC2. Passive object of an active sensation  
IC3. Material substratum  
IC4. External object  
IC5. Causes or occasions in the brain  
IC6. Matter, as whatever causes my ideas  
IC7. Instrument

- 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 and so secondary (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.
  - And why do that?!
- 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).

# A Functional Definition of Matter

## IC6 and IC7

- “*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).
- Philonous responds
  - Only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas.
  - An all-powerful God could have no use for an intermediate instrument.
- “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).
- God would just not waste her time making material things!

# Descartes on 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 (*Meditations* AT VII.79-80, AW 64b).

# Berkeley Against Descartes's Argument for the Material World

- Berkeley could argue for idealism from a Principle of Sufficient Reason.
  - 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 taking the detour through physical objects.
- “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 obviously unsound.
- Which step or inference would Descartes deny?

# Locke's Inference

- Let's 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 shows that the claim that material objects exist is 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” (II.VIII.15, AW 334a, emphasis in last line added).
- There appears to be a contradiction 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, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.
- Still, even though Locke and Berkeley reject innate ideas, they have to admit that we have some ability to reason or infer.
- Since we have such an ability, it is unclear why an inference to material objects is illegitimate.
  - We'll return to inferences later.
  - (Including transcendental ones, with Kant!)



# Berkeley's Idealistic World

- The esse of objects is to be perceived.
- There is no reason to posit anything beyond perceptions aside from their cause, i.e. God.
  - ▶ *Philonous*: Since, therefore, it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities, does it not follow that where the one exists, there necessarily the other exists likewise?
  - ▶ *Hylas*: It should seem so.
  - ▶ *Philonous*: Consequently, the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities are without any further application of force against the primary too (First Dialogue, AW 468a).
- Locke believes that our ideas of primary qualities resemble properties of material objects.
  - ▶ The inference to an intermediate cause of our ideas (i.e. physical objects) is, for Berkeley, illegitimate.
  - ▶ There is no primary/secondary distinction, since all qualities are, strictly speaking, secondary.

# Three Main Berkeley Topics

✓1. Arguments for idealism against the reality of the primary qualities

▸ Really.

→2. **Arguments against abstract ideas**

3. Accounts of mathematics and science

# Idealism and Abstraction

- Berkeley's idealism is motivated both by his arguments against the reality of the primary qualities and his objections to Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas.
- Locke accounted for our knowledge of mathematics, science, and all general terms by appealing to our psychological powers of reflection.
- Prominent among those powers is our ability to abstract, to form ideas corresponding to general terms.
- Berkeley believes that this purported capacity is the source of an atheistic, skeptical materialism.

# Locke on Abstract Ideas

- According to Locke, our ideas of primary qualities, like extension, correspond to real properties of real, material objects.
  - Those ideas do not correspond to particular sensations.
  - We experience an extended chair, 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.
  - We create general terms to stand for the abstract ideas in our minds.
  - 'Body' stands for an abstract idea of body, which corresponds, somehow, to actual material bodies.
- Since we can not form an abstract idea of body, Berkeley argues, there is no reason to claim that there are any bodies.
  - The term 'bodies' stands for no idea at all.

# Berkeley on Abstract 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).

# Two Kinds of Abstraction

- A1: Considering one property of an object independently of others.
  - ▶ We can consider the blueness of a chair, apart from its size, shape, or texture.
  - ▶ We can think of the taste of an apple apart from its crunchiness or color.
  - ▶ We just focus on one of the sensations that is bundled together with the others.
- A1 is unobjectionable.
  - ▶ Our ordinary ideas of objects are actually collections of particular sensations.
  - ▶ “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).
  - ▶ A1 is really not a process of abstraction at all and will not lead to beliefs in a material world.
    - A Sensation is just a sensation
- A2: Forming an abstract, general idea.
  - ▶ Locke claims that we can form ideas of redness and color by abstracting from our visual idea of the apple.
  - ▶ If we have a capacity A2, then, Berkeley believes, we could use it to construct a real idea which represents a material object.

# Against A2

## A2: Forming an abstract, general idea.

- Locke claims that we use A2 to construct an abstract idea of a triangle which stands for all triangles whether scalene, isosceles, or equilateral.
- Berkeley insists that we have no ability A2.
  - ▶ “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).
- No idea, no picture in our minds, could have all of these properties at once.
  - ▶ An idea of chair would have to apply to all chairs.
  - ▶ Some chairs are black, others are blue or green.
  - ▶ 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.

# Two Misuses of Our Supposed Capacity A2

A2: Forming an abstract,  
general idea.

- “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).
- 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.
  - They each involve thinking that the so-called primary qualities are real properties of external, physical objects.
  - M1 is the creation of a new idea on the basis of existing ideas.
  - M2 is the acceptance of a material world independent of any perceivers.



# No General Ideas

- *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)

# Using Particular Ideas to Stand for Other Ideas

- We have need of terms, like 'triangle', which stand as universals, so that they refer to various different objects.
- 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).

# Berkeley on General Terms

- We can use general terms, if we wish.
  - ▶ We should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some thing.
  - ▶ Only discrete sensations and their perceivers exist.
- Berkeley thus extends Locke's conceptualism/nominalism to all 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 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.
- 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).

# Three Main Berkeley Topics

- ✓1. Arguments for idealism, and against materialism
- ✓2. Arguments against abstract ideas
- 3. Accounts of mathematics and science
  - Tuesday