

# Abstract Ideas and the Uses of Language

Locke, Berkeley, and Hume

# Locke – Some Background

- Enlightenment thinker
- British Empiricist: Knowledge comes primarily through the experience we obtain through sensory experience
- Tabula rasa: refutes the rationalist belief that there are innate ideas.
  - Pro-abstraction: abstraction is essential to the thought process
- In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he examines the limits of human understanding (what we can really 'know') by seeking to investigate the nature and the source of human knowledge

# Background on George Berkeley

- Irish Bishop
- Monist
- Empiricists
- Anti-Abstractionist
- “The Principles of Human Knowledge”

# Hume's Biography

- Scottish philosopher, historian, economist, and essayist known especially for his philosophical empiricism and skepticism. He was one of the most important figures in the history of Western philosophy and the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume is often grouped with John Locke, George Berkeley, and a handful of others as a British Empiricist (even though he was hated by the British)
- Hume-Atheist; Monist (mind); Empiricist-sensory experience; external world ; anti-abstraction; God does not give general ideas; mind engages in sensory experiences and through reflection from memory forms ideas; mind is nothing but perceptions
- Hume was seen as a forerunner of the logical positivist movement; a form of anti-metaphysical empiricism.
- Hume's empiricism consisted in the idea that it is our knowledge, and not our ability to conceive, that is restricted to what can be experienced. To be sure, Hume thought that we can form beliefs about that which extends beyond any possible experience, through the operation of faculties such as custom and the imagination, but he was skeptical about claims to knowledge on this basis.
- Hume's empirical method based mainly on:
  1. Skepticism
  2. Sensory Experience (materialism)
  3. Epistemology
  4. Problem of Induction
  5. Psychological abstraction

# Book III – Abstraction and the Thought Process

- What is abstraction: the process whereby the mind distinguishes a general idea from a particular object, for e.g. the idea of red from red lipstick
- Hume believes that abstraction implies inductively creating general principles from every day experiences, but because it is a subjective process, it does not accurately correspond to reality
- Berkeley believes, like Locke, the mind separates specific details from sensory objects in order to create an abstract ideas about their similar properties
  - Abstraction can occur through mental separation or mental exclusion. The former happens when we extract a quality/property of an object and separate it from the other qualities and properties of the object. The latter happens when we exclude distinguishing qualities/properties of multiple objects and classify them as a single general abstract idea.
- Abstraction is absolutely necessary in areas like Mathematics and Science, as it allows us to arrive at general propositions and laws. Locke claims that if there were no abstraction, there would be no mathematical knowledge because of a failure to reach generality.
- Abstraction and certainty: mathematical claims are about our abstract ideas and not about the external world, thus we can be sure of their certainty

# Abstraction

- Berkeley takes advantage of the contradiction in Locke's work.
- Does not believe that if all knowledge comes from sense experience then insensible things can be known.
- Berkeley does not believe this abstraction of sensory experience can take place, thus founding his anti-abstractionist philosophy.

# Abstraction

- “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)

# Abstraction and Thinking

- Abstraction is not a real faculty of the mind because we learn through human experience; because our perception of the world is subjective, there is no way we can develop general principles about the universe encapsulating all of our perceptions
- “The mind never has anything present to it but the perceptions and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connection with objects. The supposition of such a connection is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning” (Enquiry, § XII.1, AW 595a)
- The external world, as well as any laws governing or applying in world and any mathematical principles, is perceived only mediately or inferred (therefore, the external world exists within the mind as opposed to existing independent of the mind)
- “The idea of extension...is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. Nothing can save us from this conclusion but the asserting that the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by abstraction; an opinion which, if we examine it accurately, we shall find to be unintelligible, and even absurd” (Enquiry, § XII.1, AW 595b)\_



# Language

- Words represent ideas in our minds. We suppose them to refer to other people's ideas and external objects.
- Locke gives an example of a child for whom 'gold' stands for idea of the color, for a second child it stands for the gold and the weightiness, for a third child the idea of malleability is added to the idea of gold. It's clear to Locke that each child applies their own idea of the term 'gold' in usage of language: none can refer by it to a more complex idea than they know.
- There are particular ideas and abstract ideas. We use general terms (for abstract ideas) because we're limited by our human capacities: we can't separately name every particular thing.

# Berkeley Language

- Because we can not abstract, we can have no ideas of material objects.
- Names can be given to groupings of certain sensory experiences but these are nothing but labels.
- We use these labels together forming phrases to get to a more acute idea of a certain perception

# Hume's Appraisal of Language

- Value-Hume does not believe that language holds any particular value in expressing ideas because words cannot accurately convey the details of ideas
  - Hume believes that the rhetorical uses of language distort not only the ideas that we form but also their accurate representation of reality
- “Their secret nature and, consequently, all their effects and influence may change without any change in their sensible qualities “(Enquiry, § IV.2, AW 547b)
- “In all abstract reasonings, there is one go further towards illustrating subject than by all eloquence and copious expression in world; this point of view we should endeavor to reach and reserve flowers of rhetoric for subjects which are more adapted” (Enquiry, § XII.3, AW 599)

# Hume's Concept of Language

- Hume believes that all people have subjective, sensory experiences and, as such, are bound by their limited perceptions of the world; therefore, the mind is literally comprised of perceptions
- “We may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated thoughts or ideas. The other species want a name in our language and in most others, I suppose, because it was not requisite for any philosophical purposes to rank them in general term of appellation. Let us, therefore, use a little freedom and call them impressions, employing that word in a sense somewhat different than usual” (Enquiry, § 2, AW 539)
- In Hume's mind, we create ideas in our minds of our own free will, but they are originally derived from the objects that we experience through our senses (i.e. the gold mountain\_
- “When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, gold and mountain, with which we are formerly acquainted. In short, all the materials of thinking are derived from either our outward or inward our inward sentiment” (Enquiry, § 2, AW 539)

# Language and Communication

- Locke is an anti-essentialist: represents a breakaway from Aristotelian essentialism.
  - There are no fixed boundaries in nature: no single classification of things. The mind is active in making our ideas of sorts and that there are so many particular properties to choose among that it is possible for people to end up with very different ideas of the essence of a certain substance. The ideas that we use to make our nominal essences come to us from experience.
- For Locke, communication rests on the basis that people use words with the meaning that other people also hold for those words. But at the same time the usage of words isn't consistent or constant. This is how a language develops and we improve and clarify our ideas.

# Berkeley Language

“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).

# Psychological Capacities, Mathematics, Sciences and Abstract Ideas

- Given the representational theory of ideas, which Hume shares with Locke and Berkeley, we do have some psychological capacities to alter the ideas of sensation and to create new ones
- “If this, therefore, be absurd in fact and reality, it must also be absurd in idea, since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible” (Treatise I.1.7, p 5)
- Hume separates mathematics and science. Like Locke, Hume bases our knowledge of mathematics on the principle of contradiction and our bare psychological capacities. But Hume agrees with Berkeley that our claims about the material world are unjustified. Hume’s conclusions about science are skeptical, though, rather than idealistic
- “The principal difficulty in mathematics [and sciences] is the length of inferences and compass of thought requisite to the forming of any conclusion. And, perhaps, our progress of natural philosophy is chiefly retard by the want of proper experiments and phenomena which are often discovered by chance and cannot always be found when requisite, even by the most diligent and prudent inquiry” (Enquiry, § 7.1, AW 556)

# Hume's Concept of Language

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# Links Between Language and Ideas

- Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact

“All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, namely, relations of ideas and matters of fact; of first kind are sciences of geometry, algebra, and arithmetic, and in short, every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. Propositions of this kind discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe” (Enquiry, § 4.1, AW 542)

“All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of cause and effect. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses” (Enquiry, § 4.1, AW 542)

“This proposition, that causes and effects are discoverable, not by reason but by experience, will readily be admitted with regard to such objects as we remember to have once been altogether unknown to us, since we must be conscious of the utter inability which we then lay under of foretelling what would arise from them” (Enquiry, § 4.1, AW 543)

- Therefore, we only receive subjective knowledge in the form of ideas from experience and not divine intervention

# Compounding Themes

- Language
  1. Locke-as long as words abide by the parameters of their intended meanings, one can reach general notions or ideas
  2. Berkeley-general ideas exist but specific ideas cannot exist; words represent specific ideas cannot be arranged to create general axioms
  3. Hume-words are distortions of ideas because they cannot completely cohere to the complexities of ideas that exist in the mind
- Sensory experiences
  1. Locke-there are no innate ideas and humans are solely responsible for sensory experiences
  2. Berkeley-God provides sensory experiences but humans are responsible for creating ideas from those sensory experiences
  3. Hume-we generate ideas from sensory experiences
- Abstraction
  1. Locke-we have the faculty in the mind to create abstract ideas
  2. Berkeley-we do not have the faculty in the mind to create abstract ideas; abstract ideas distort reality from their general representations
  3. Hume-we do not have the faculty in the mind to create abstract ideas; abstract ideas distort reality from their general representations
- Empiricism
  1. Locke-believes, idealistically, that abstraction will lead us to the truth about the structure of the universe
  2. Berkeley-believes that there is really no way to reach general truths about the universe
  3. Hume-believes that we need to deductively reason through different experiences in order to discern the truth about life as it occurs in nature

# Philosopher's Ven-Diagram

John Locke                      David Hume                      George Berkeley

No innate ideas

Abstraction is a natural faculty of the mind used to inductively create general principles

Believes in mind and body (dualist)

Idealist

Believes math and science extend faculty of abstraction

Ideas derived from sensory experiences

Abstraction is not a natural faculty and induction distorts reality

Believes in solely the mind  
But as a limited set of perceptions

Skepticist; Naturalist

Believes math  
And science are deceitfully subjective

No innate; but God provides sensory experiences

Abstraction does not exist and induction is distorts reality

Believes in the mind's ability to extend properties of objects

General empiricist limited to God

Believes math and science extend ability to abstraction