

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Class #18
Berkeley Against Abstract Ideas

Business

We're a Day behind, but we have plenty of time during the Presentation week-and-a-half.

Today:

- ▶ Presentation Three
- ▶ The doctrine of abstract ideas

Three Main Berkeley Topics

- ✓1. Arguments for idealism against the reality of the primary qualities
- 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.
- Let's take a moment to look at Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas.

Empiricism, Science, and Mathematics

- The empiricist has difficulty explaining our knowledge of mathematics and scientific generalizations.
- It is difficult to see how experience can support universal claims:
 - ▶ about mathematical objects, which are not sensible.
 - ▶ About scientific laws which extrapolate from that experience.
- Locke's accounts of our knowledge of science and mathematics do not invoke innate ideas.
- He relies on sensation, intuition and demonstration.
 - ▶ Using reason to discover relations among ideas of sensation.
 - ▶ "I do not doubt but it will be easily granted tht the *knowledge* we have of *mathematical truths* is not only certain, but *real knowledge*, and not the bare empty vision of vain insignificant *chimeras* of the brain. And yet, if we will consider, we shall find that it is only of our own *ideas*" (IV.IV.6, AW 404b).
- Psychological capacities for reflection
 - ▶ contemplation, memory, discerning, comparison, composition, abstraction
 - ▶ Abstraction supports Locke's account of our knowledge of science and mathematics.
 - ▶ We start with an overview about how language works.

Locke's Philosophy of Language

- Words stand for ideas in our minds.
 - Controversial claim
 - We ordinarily take many words to stand for objects outside of our minds.
 - We normally take 'this table' to refer to the table, not to my idea of the table.
- A representational theory of mind
 - Ideas are like pictures in the mind
 - Terms stand for ideas, which correspond to objects, like chairs, people, or even circles.

Words Stand for Ideas

- Locke's argument:
 - LL1. Society depends on our ability to communicate our ideas, so words must be able to stand for ideas.
 - LL2. Since my ideas precede my communication, words must refer to my ideas before they could refer to anything else.
 - LL3. If words refer both to my ideas and to something else (e.g. your idea, or an external object), then they would be ambiguous.
 - LL4. But, words are not ordinarily ambiguous.
 - LL5. So, words ordinarily do not stand for something other than my ideas.
 - LLC. So, words stand for my ideas.
- “[It is] perverting the use of words, and bring[ing] unavoidable obscurity and confusion into their signification, whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds” (Locke, *Essay*, §III.II.5).

Words Do Not Stand for External Objects

“A child having taken notice of nothing in the metal he hears called gold, but the bright shining yellow colour, he applies the word gold only to his own idea of that colour, and nothing else; and therefore calls the same colour in a peacock’s tail gold. Another that hath better observed, adds to shining yellow great weight: and then the sound gold, when he uses it, stands for a complex idea of a shining yellow and a very weighty substance. Another adds to those qualities fusibility: and then the word gold signifies to him a body, bright, yellow, fusible, and very heavy. Another adds malleability. Each of these uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not...” (Locke, *Essay* §III.II.3).

General Terms

- Particular terms correspond to simple ideas of sensation.
- There are too many particular things for them all to have particular names.
- We have to use general names.
 1. Human capacity is limited (Locke, *Essay*, III.III.2, AW 377a).
 2. You don't have names for my ideas and I don't have names for yours (Locke, *Essay*, III.III.3, AW 377a-b).
 3. Science depends on generality (Locke, *Essay*, III.III.4, AW 377b).
- We use general names for communication and for science.

Abstraction

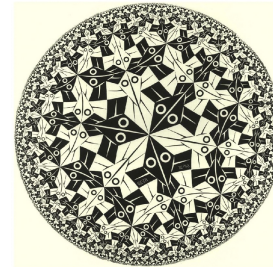
- sense experiences
- backs, seats, legs
- chair
- table
- furniture
- house
- apartment building
- domicile
- animal
- person
- extension
- motion
- substance

Abstraction and Science

- Ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.
 - $v = \Delta s / \Delta t$
- We can abstract to the term, 'physical object'.
- General terms, and the abstract ideas to which they refer, apply to particular objects, but only to certain aspects of those objects.
 - “[A general] *idea* [of man] is made, not by any new addition, but only...by leaving out the shape, and some other properties signified by the name *man*, and retaining only a body, with life, sense, and spontaneous motion, comprehended under the name *animal*” (Locke, *Essay*, III.III.8, AW 378a).
- A progression of abstraction leads us from terms for particular sensations to terms for bodies.
- So, the term 'bodies', which we have constructed to stand for an abstract idea, refers to bodies, which are physical objects.

Abstraction and Mathematics

- General names are the foundation for formal sciences like mathematics and logic as well.
- We get knowledge of mathematical objects, which we do not experience, by a process of abstraction.
- Doughnuts and frisbees, and circles
- We leave out other properties, form an abstract idea, and coin a general term to stand for it.
 - We experience extended things, but not extension itself.



General Terms and Proofs

- Both the use of general terms and our ability to remember the distinct parts of a proof are essential to mathematics.
- “If...the perception that the same *ideas* will eternally have the same habitudes and relations is not a sufficient ground of knowledge, there could be no knowledge of general propositions in mathematics, for no mathematical demonstration would be any other than particular” (Locke, *Essay*, IV.I.9, AW 388b).
- The abstract generality of mathematical claims supports their certainty.
- “[The mathematician] is certain all his knowledge concerning such *ideas* is real knowledge, because intending things no further than they agree with his *ideas*, he is sure what he knows concerning those figures, when they have barely an *ideal existence* in his mind, will hold true of them also when they have real existence in matter, his consideration being barely of those figures which are the same, wherever or however they exist” (Locke, *Essay*, IV.IV.6, AW 404b).

Ethics, Too

For certainty being but the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our *ideas*; and demonstration nothing but the perception of such agreement, by the intervention of other *ideas* or mediums, our moral *ideas*, as well as mathematical, being archetypes themselves, and so adequate and complete *ideas*; all the agreement or disagreement which we shall find in them will produce real knowledge, as well as in mathematical figures (Locke, *Essay*, IV.IV.7, AW 404b).

Objectivity without Objects

- Locke's Nominalism:
 - ▶ “Universality does not belong to things themselves, which are all of them particular in their existence, even those words and *ideas* which in their signification are general. When therefore we quit particulars, the generals that rest are only creatures of our own making, their general nature being nothing but the capacity they are put into by the understanding of signifying or representing many particulars. For the signification they have is nothing but a relation that, by the mind of man, is added to them” (Locke, *Essay*, III.III.11, AW 379a).
- But Locke does not denigrate mathematical or moral knowledge.
 - ▶ “All the discourses of the mathematicians about the squaring of a circle, conic sections, or any other part of mathematics, *do not concern* the *existence* of any of those figures, but their demonstrations, which depend on their *ideas*, are the same, whether there is any square or circle existing in the world or not. In the same manner the truth and certainty of *moral* discourses abstract from the lives of men and the existence of those virtues in the world of which they treat” (Locke, *Essay*, IV.IV.8, AW 405a).
- Our knowledge of the external world is just mysterious, inexplicable without something like a rationalist's principle of sufficient reason.
 - ▶ “I think not only that it becomes the modesty of philosophy not to pronounce magisterially where we want that evidence that can produce knowledge, but also that it is of use to us to discern how far our knowledge does reach, for the state we are at present in, not being that of vision, we must in many things content ourselves with faith and probability” (Locke, *Essay*, IV.III.6, AW 394a).

Locke on Abstract Ideas

Summary

- 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.

We Have 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)

We Use Particular Ideas to Stand for Other Ideas

- We have need of terms like ‘triangle’ which stand as universals.
 - They refer to various different objects.
- 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).
- Particular terms stand strictly for my ideas.

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