

# **Philosophy 203**

## ***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

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Hamilton College  
Spring 2016**



**Class #16  
Berkeley  
Three Arguments for Idealism**

# **Business**

- Peer Evals
- Midterm Prep
- Break!

# Empiricism Topics

- ✓1. The primary/secondary distinction
- ✓2. Locke's arguments against innate ideas
- ✓3. Empiricism and perception
- ✓4. Locke on Minds, Bodies, and Thought
- ✓5. Locke's account of personal identity
- 6. The doctrine of abstract ideas
  - ▶ ✓Locke for
  - ▶ Berkeley against
- 7. Three arguments for idealism
  - ▶ against the reality of primary qualities
- 8. Idealist accounts of mathematics and science

# Against Locke's Abstract Ideas

- Locke claims that we use reflection to construct an abstract idea of a triangle which stands for all triangles whether scalene, isosceles, or equilateral.
- Berkeley insists that we have no such ability.
  - ▶ “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).

# 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.
- Hume adopts this solution, too.

# Berkeley on General Terms

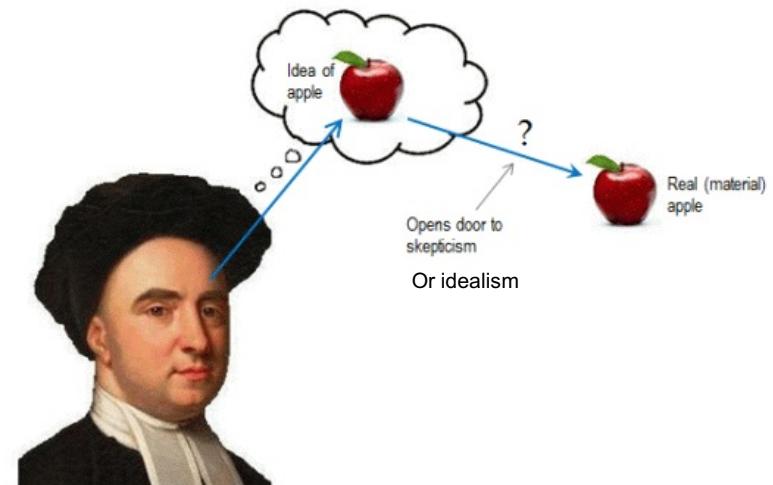
- We can use general terms, if we wish.
- We should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some thing.
- Only discrete sensations and their perceivers exist.
- Berkeley thus extends Locke's conceptualism/nominalism to all general properties, and even to terms which collect several sensations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

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# An Empiricist's Problem

- The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes from experience.
- But we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations.
- If all knowledge is of our perceptions, it follows that we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations.
- “So long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows they could not be certain they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known that the things which are perceived are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind?” (*Principles*, §86).



# Beyond the Veil?

- Descartes: we judge the existence and nature of an external world with our minds.
  - ▶ Such judgment extends beyond experience.
- Locke: our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble qualities of those objects.
  - ▶ To assert a resemblance, we have to be able to perceive both objects.
  - ▶ We seem to be stuck with only our sensations.
    - The veil of ideas
- Berkeley: there are no material objects.
  - ▶ “It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men that houses, mountains, rivers, and, in a word, sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... What are the aforementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations?” (*Principles*, §4)
  - ▶ “By matter...we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident from what we have already shown that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence it is plain that the very notion of what is called matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it” (*Principles*, §9).

# Three Arguments for Idealism

- I1. From the sensibility of objects
- I2. From the relativity of perceptions
- I3. The reductive argument

# Team Activity

## Objects and Perception

- “The various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this by anyone who shall attend to what is meant by the term *exist* when applied to sensible things. The table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed—meaning by that that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odor; that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*,<sup>1</sup> nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds of thinking things which perceive them” (Berkeley, *Principles* §3, AW 447a–b).
- Which is the best interpretation of Berkeley’s claim that *esse* is *percipi*?
  - A. I can perceive objects by their sensible properties, but I do not know anything about their underlying properties.
  - B. Objects exist as long as some person perceives them.
  - C. We cannot even understand the claim that objects exist without being perceived.
  - D. Objects have sensible, secondary properties, and insensible, primary qualities.
  - E. All that exists are perceivers.

# Three Arguments for Idealism

- ✓ I1. From the sensibility of objects
- I2. **From the relativity of perceptions**
- I3. The reductive argument

# Lockean Principles

LP1: If one perceives an object as having two (or more) incompatible ideas, then those ideas do not represent real properties of the object.

LP1C1: Even if a change in us entails the change in the perceived quality, the ideas which change can not be veridical.

LP1C2: Qualities that appear different to different observers are not veridical.

LP2: If an idea of an object is the same under all conditions, that idea is veridical.

LP2C: If every observer receives the same idea from an object, then that idea is veridical.



# Team Activity

## Berkeley's Lockean Arguments

- 1. Motion
  - 2. Number
  - 3. Shape
  - 4. Size
  - 5. Solidity
- A. "A body that describes a mile in an hour moves three times faster than it would in case it described only a mile in three hours... And is not time measured by the succession of ideas in our minds?"
  - B. "A mite must be supposed to see his own foot, and things equal or even less than it, as bodies of some considerable dimension, though at the same time they appear to you scarce discernible or at best as so many visible points."
  - C. "The same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch."
  - D. "As we approach to or recede from an object, the visible extension caries, being at one distance ten or a hundred times greater than at another."
  - E. "We say one book, one page, one line; all these are equally units though some contain several of the others."
  - F. "To one eye [an object] shall seem little, smooth, and round, when at the same time it appears to the other, great, uneven, and angular... You may at any time make the experiment by looking with one eye bare and with the other through a microscope."
  - G. "What seems hard to one animal may appear soft to another who has greater force and firmness of limbs."

# Extension: An Objection

- Extension is perhaps the most important primary quality.
- If there is an objective fact about my extension which is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument from relativity fails.
- The mite, the giant, and I can all agree that I am six feet tall.
  - ▶ That is, the correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver.
- But the scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.
  - ▶ A yard: the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.
  - ▶ Standard meter bar
  - ▶ Meter as 1,650,763.73 wavelengths of orange-red light emitted from a krypton-86 lamp
  - ▶ Since 1983, the meter has been defined as the distance traveled by light in a vacuum in  $1/299,792,458$  of a second.
- What if everything were to double in size?
  - ▶ *Phineas and Ferb*, “Attack of the Fifty-Foot Sister”
  - ▶ Dilations and restrictions could happen all of the time, without us knowing!
  - ▶ We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.

# **Berkeley's Arguments From the Relativity of Perceptions: Summary**

- Berkeley has considered all of Locke's primary qualities as we experience them.
- He has argued that these perceptions vary in the same way that perceptions of the secondary qualities do.
- All qualities are secondary qualities.
- We have no veridical primary qualities, representing a material world.

SPRING  
BREAK!!!

