

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004

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I. The Big Question for Berkeley:

Can we get out of our mental states to refer to, or understand, the world, even if it's not a physical world?

The solipsistic picture of Descartes here returns.

Hume shows that the prospects are even worse for the empiricist, even if you reject Berkeley's idealism.

Recall that Descartes relied on pure reason to generate the knowledge of which he was most certain: of his and God's existence, and of the truths of mathematics.

Locke rejects Descartes' innate knowledge and tries to account for all knowledge while starting with a blank slate.

This made his account of mathematics weak.

Berkeley eliminates mathematics, urging that it is useful, but that our mathematical terms are empty names, like 'physical object', 'redness', or 'table'.

You might think that Berkeley could make mathematical terms refer to our mental states, make them mental objects, as he does with 'apple', a collection of particular experiences.

But to do so would rely on the same process of abstraction which led us to the error of positing physical objects, §118.

Berkeley thinks infinite divisibility is a paradox, §127.

We think that we can divide an inch into ten thousand parts, because we can use it to represent a much larger segment, as on a map, which does represent the longer length.

But to think that we can divide a finite segment into arbitrarily many segments violates the constraints of the minimum sensibilia, the smallest perceivable segment.

Infinite divisibility was an important element of the new science, because the calculus depends on continuity.

That is, the abstraction that Berkeley rejects also serves as the basis for science, for the laws of motion.

Descartes thought these were innate truths.

If these laws were universally valid, then that might serve as an argument for their truth.

And hence for the legitimacy of abstraction.

Berkeley has to construe science in a different way, given his empiricism.

But he doesn't, §§30-32.

This sets the stage for Hume.

II. Some epistemological questions

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, answers questions like the following. (See handout.)

How do you know? (Or, Why do you believe?)

- 1) You are taking a philosophy class?
- 2) Your best friend likes you?
- 3) Enron committed accounting fraud.
- 4) Shakespeare wrote *The Tragedy of Macbeth*?
- 5) $2+2 = 4$?
- 6) The sun will rise tomorrow?
- 7) $F=ma$?
- 8) Every effect has a cause?

The answers to these questions may differ.

The answer to the first question might involve some kind of introspection.

The answer to the last might involve scientific principles, or assumptions about the world.

The last four are problems for empiricism.

Empiricists may deny them.

Many empiricists are nominalists about mathematical terms.

Fictionalism: mathematical objects are convenient fictions.

Berkeley is a nominalist.

Consider his claims about infinite divisibility and the minimum sensibilia.

For him, scientific laws are regularities, provided by God for convenience, but with exceptions (miracles).

But these regularities, as abstract ideas, are not real ideas.

Hume agrees with Berkeley, in part, about abstract objects, p106.

So why should we believe in empiricism?

Hume has an argument, which we shall examine next time.