

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2004
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Lecture Notes, November 3

Continuing our discussion of Berkeley, who denies the existence of material objects.

I. How the doctrine of abstract ideas leads to belief in physical objects.

Read §§4-5.

Recall Locke's analysis of ideas as images.

This is just the representational theory of the mind: words stand for ideas which represent the world.

Berkeley considers an apple, §1.

We call something an apple if it has the sensory properties we associate with apples.

So, our term 'apple' refers to those ideas.

What about the idea of man?

No image will do.

For, would it be an image of a short man, or a tall man?

Of a hairy man, or of a bald man?

Read Introduction, §13.

Locke says we can abstract from the various particular ideas to that which they have in common.

To this commonality we give a name, and that's the object.

The name represents an idea, so there must be something to correspond to the idea.

Consider the progression: three chairs, chairs in general, furniture, bodies.

This progression of abstraction leads us from particular sensations to the idea of material objects (bodies) in general.

We start with the passing show, the three chairs.

We find that there are commonalities.

We abstract to the notion of a chair.

Now do the same thing for table, and we get to a more abstract notion of furniture.

Continuing we get to bodies, or physical objects, §99.

We can progress to a notion of motion.

These ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.

Berkeley's argument:

If we can not abstract, then we can not have ideas of objects.

All we have is the passing show, the experiences of the particulars.

II. Berkeley on mathematical knowledge, and knowledge of physical laws, like gravity, and logic

Remember, Locke had to appeal to abstraction, or generalization to respond to the rationalist's criticism that the empiricist has no account of these.

Berkeley says that we can give a name to the commonalities, but that's as far as it goes.

Read §5.

Berkeley is a nominalist about properties.

We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter, as all are abstractions.

Matter is an unknown something, §76.

To speak of it is trifling with words, §81

The real problem here is the contradiction, §13

Compare to Descartes, AT 79-80

Berkeley has several more constructive arguments for idealism, in addition to his criticisms from the doctrine of abstract ideas

III. Argument for idealism from empiricism

1) Objects are sensible things.

2) Sensible things have sensible qualities.

3) The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.

4) Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.

So, objects are strictly mental.

I.e. there is no physical world.