Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, November 16

I. Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas

Berkeley thinks that the doctrine of abstract ideas leads Locke to the paradoxes and inconsistencies Berkeley claims characterize materialism.
Berkeley points to two misuses of abstraction.
One misuse involves abstracting existence from perception.
Another misuse yields general terms.

Locke relies on abstraction for all ideas which are not particular sensations, to justify knowledge of any kinds of general terms.
Remember that Desscartes included general ideas as Class III beliefs, beliefs that only the deceiver could make us doubt.
Locke relied on abstract ideas to respond to Descartes.
Locke wanted to account for all of our knowledge, starting from a blank slate.
To account for our knowledge of mathematics, he needed to rely on an ability to abstract, or generalize, from experience with ordinary objects and inscriptions.
See Locke, §I.1.15.
For Locke, we abstract the triangularity of triangular-shaped drawings from their specific properties: the chalk, the slight curve in one side, the location on the board.
We ignore some properties and focus on others.
We focus only on the triangularity, for example.

Let's consider this process of abstraction in a bit more detail.
We start with our sense experiences, of several chairs, for example.
We notice that they have common properties: backs, seats, legs.
We give a name to whatever has these common properties.
This name, 'chair', is abstract, in the sense that it doesn't refer to a particular chair.
Instead, it is a general term, which applies to any chair.
The same process yields 'table'.
Now, we can consider the commonalities among tables and chairs, and sofas and desks.
This yields an even more general term, 'furniture'.
We have abstracted again.

The same process which yields 'chair' gives us other terms like 'house' and 'apartment building'.
We can abstract again to get 'domicile'.

Similarly, we arrive at names for 'animal', 'person', and other objects.
All of the objects we have considered are extended.
We can abstract again, and arrive at a term, 'extension'.
Similarly, we get the term, 'motion'.
These ideas of bodies and motion are the foundations of physical science.

A scientist uses ‘motion’, for example, when he asserts ‘$v = \Delta s/\Delta t$’, that velocity is equal to the change in displacement over time.
Lastly, we can abstract to the term, ‘physical object’.

This progression of abstraction leads us from particular sensations to ideas of bodies.
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.

In sum,
We have a term ‘bodies’.
The term stands for an abstract idea, ‘bodies’.
An idea is a representation of an external object.
So, the idea ‘body’ refers to bodies, which are physical objects.
If, on the other hand, we can not form an abstract idea ‘bodies’, then there is no reason to claim that there are any bodies.
The term ‘bodies’ is, says Berkeley, empty.
The same process of reasoning applies to terms for individual bodies, like ‘apple’ and for other general terms, like ‘physical object’, ‘the physical world’, ‘the universe’, etc.

II. Two kinds of abstraction

There are two kinds of processes which might be called ‘abstraction’, and which Berkeley thinks lead to belief in material objects.
Read §4-5.
If we can abstract in either way, then we can have ideas of material objects.
And if we have ideas of material objects, then they correspond to matter; there is a physical world.
But Berkeley denies that we can have these abstract, general ideas.
He holds that all our ideas are particular.
Berkeley considers an apple, §1.
We use the term ‘apple’ to refer to a collection of sensory ideas.

The first kind of abstraction
Read Introduction §7.
A1: Considering one property of an object independently of others.
For example, we can consider the blackness of a chair, apart from its size, or shape, or texture.
Or, the tate of the apple, apart from its crunchiness, or color.
We can just focus on one of the sensations that is bundled together with the others.

Berkeley discusses the second kind of abstraction in Introduction §8.
A2: Forming an abstract, general idea.
For example, having an idea of blackness, or of color.
Even the idea ‘chair’ is an abstract, general idea.
Berkeley insists that we have no ability A2.
This is the core of his argument, and you can see it, again, at Introduction §13.
There, he argues that we can not have an idea of ‘triangle’ since it would have to correspond to equilateral, isosceles, and scalene triangles.
And no idea, no picture in our minds, could have all these properties.
Similarly, we can not have an idea of chair, because it would have to apply to all chairs.
Some chairs are black, others are blue, green, etc.

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.
We can use general terms, if we wish.
We should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some thing.
Only particulars, single discrete sensations, exist.

In sum,
We have no ability A2.
A1 is unobjectionable.
But A1 will not lead to beliefs in a material world.

III. Two misuses of A2
(Of course, all uses of A2 will be misuses.)

Read §99.
M1: Abstracting extension from other properties of an object.
M2: Abstracting extension of an object from our perception of it.

Really, by M2, Berkeley means:
M2*: Abstracting *existence* from perception.

Since we can not abstract, then we can not have ideas of objects.
All we have is the passing show, the experiences of the particulars.

IV. Interlude

We have been discussing Berkeley's critical argument for idealism.
The critical argument accuses the materialist of making an unjustified inference to materialism, on the basis of the doctrine of abstract ideas.
Berkeley wants to show that this inference, while common, is mistaken.
Berkeley also has several constructive arguments for idealism.
The constructive arguments, which we now proceed to examine, are independent of his criticisms of the doctrine of abstract ideas

V. 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.

On premises 1) and 2), read §3.
This argument is not a valid argument, as it stands.
You might take some time to find the problems with it.

I think it fairly represents one aspect of Berkeley's argument, though.
Remember, the empiricist claim is that all we know is what originally comes in through the senses.

Berkeley's position is often summarized, as he writes in §3, that for objects, their esse is percipi.
'Esse is percipi' means 'being is perception'.
In fact, for Berkeley, there are perceptions, and perceivers.
The notion of a perceiver causes difficulties for Berkeley, to which we will return.

That secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind, is uncontroversial among Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley.
Berkeley extends the point.
We perceive only the perceptions, not what is behind them.
Recall the original Empiricist's Problem.
All knowledge comes from experience.
We experience sensations, not their causes.
So, we have no knowledge of the material world.
Locke and Berkeley disagree over the status of our ideas about primary qualities.
Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.
Locke argues that they represent, and resemble, material objects.

Berkeley provides two arguments to show that **primary** qualities (like extension, and motion) are merely ideas, merely mental things.
1. Lockean
2. Reductive