

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Fall 2005
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Lecture Notes, November 23

I. Berkeley's nominalism

Locke is a nominalist about the secondary qualities, but a realist about the primary qualities. Our ideas of primary qualities, like extension, correspond to real properties of real, material objects. But those ideas do not correspond to particular sensations. We experience an extended chair, say, but not extension itself. We have to strip away the other qualities to either focus on only the extension of an object, or construct a new idea of extension. In this sense, ideas of primary qualities are abstract. Descartes said that they are innate, and so we can know them by reflecting on our own minds. Locke had to appeal to abstraction, since he rejects innate ideas.

Berkeley extends Locke's nominalism to all properties of objects. We have a bundle of sensations which form an experience which we call a red chair, say. But the names 'chair' and 'red' are just convenient labels, and should not indicate any existence of the chair or color beyond my current experience of it. If 'chair' actually referred to a thing, it would have to refer to red chairs and blue chairs and tall chairs and short chairs. We can give a name to commonalities among particular sensations, but this is just a name. Berkeley is a nominalist about everything except particular experiences. 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 in Introduction §13. Compare to Descartes, AT 79-80

II. Berkeley on the resemblance hypothesis

Berkeley accepts the resemblance hypothesis, in a way. Locke used the resemblance hypothesis as support for his materialism, for his view that material objects are the causes of our ideas. Obviously, Berkeley does not follow Locke in this way.

Consider two different refinements of the resemblance hypothesis.
(RH1): My ideas resemble material objects.
(RH2): My ideas resemble their causes.

Berkeley rejects RH1, but accepts RH2.
So, what are these causes, if they are not material objects?
Recall, that Berkeley says that ideas can only resemble other ideas, §8.

III. What happens to ideas when we are not perceiving them?

Read §6.

They may subsist in the mind of other spirits.

But what if no person is perceiving them?

Sensible things have to be perceived.

But it does not follow that they are frequently created and annihilated, §48.

Consider the limerick:

There was a young man who said God
Must think it exceedingly odd
When he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the quad
Dear sir, your confusion is odd
I am always about in the quad
and that's why this tree
will continue to be
Since observed by, yours faithfully, God.

IV. Berkeley's world

Locke and Descartes posit matter as the cause of our ideas.

This matter really has only the primary qualities as properties.

But on this picture, there is no yellow, no sweetness: all secondary properties are just names.

Berkeley tries making the terms refer to my sensory states.

The lemon is yellow, since I really have a yellow sensory experience.

Berkeley's account solves the problem of error for our beliefs based on the senses, like the water experiment.

This is the problem that led both Descartes and Locke to reject the resemblance hypothesis for ideas of secondary qualities.

But Berkeley has a new set of problems.

V. Intersubjectivity

One of Berkeley's new problems is the problem of intersubjectivity.

How do we account for different people having similar experiences?

Similarly, how do we account for the fact that objects do not seem to go in and out of existence, that they seem to persist?

Berkeley posits God, to ensure both intersubjectivity and persistence.

On a metaphoric level, our experiences are like peering into the mind of God.

VI. Berkeley on inference

A criticism of Berkeley's idealism: Since we don't perceive our minds (our selves), it would seem that our own existence is an illegitimate inference, too!

Berkeley agrees that we have no idea of ourselves, §138.
He says that we can have a notion, rather than an idea., §27 and §140.
We get to this notion, by inference, §145.
We infer both ourselves, and other minds.
And we can infer God, §146, 148-9.

Notice that the representational theory of mind is cracking.
Berkeley is distinguishing thought from ideas of sensation.

Berkeley's arguments for God's existence is reminiscent of arguments from Aquinas. See, for example:
<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/100203.htm>

Anselm's ontological argument is an a priori argument.
Berkeley and Aquinas (mostly) argue a posteriori, or empirically.
Empirical arguments start with observation.
Consider the argument from design: a watch in the desert leads you to infer that a person had been there.

Aquinas' 5 ways: *Summa Theologica*, Question 2, Article 3

God as unchanged changer.

God as first cause.

God as necessarily existent being, since creation out of nothingness is impossible.

God as the greatest thing.

The arrow (i.e. the world) must be directed by an archer.

Notice that God is not the foundation of Berkeley's work, but a conclusion.

The *Principles* is philosophy, not theology.

Still, there are theological components to the work.

He argues, for example, that both uniformity in nature and blemishes in nature support God's existence, §146 and §152.