Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2005
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Lecture Notes, March 30

I. Reviewing Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas

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 the idea of material objects (bodies).

II. Berekeley's worries about abstraction

For Locke, and Berkeley, terms stand for ideas in our minds.
If we can perform this kind of abstraction, 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, see §1.

Actually, there are two kinds of processes which might be called 'abstraction'.
Berkeley considers both in Introduction §7-§8.
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.

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.
We can use the term, if we wish, but we should not be misled into thinking that it corresponds to some thing.
The only things that exist are particulars, particular chairs, not general chairs.

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

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.

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

IV. 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.

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

V. Berkeley’s Lockean argument against primary qualities

See handout, excerpt from the *Three Dialogues*

The use of the following principles characterize a Lockean argument:
If two or more people have different experiences of the sensation, then that sensation is merely mental.
If one person in two or more different states (at different times) has different experiences, then that sensation is merely mental.
If every one has the same perception, then the perception represents something real.

Berkeley’s argument is that this last principle is never fulfilled.
There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.
He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties:

For number, consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.
Read §12, on the relation of number to extension.

For size and extension, consider the mite, a tiny insect.
What appears large to one perceiver can appear tiny to another.
To a giant, I appear small, while to an ant, I appear large.

An obvious rejoinder to Berkeley’s argument about extension is that there is something on which the ant, the giant, and me can agree: I am six feet tall.
If there is an objective fact about my extension, if it is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley’s argument fails.
This response is insufficient.
See if you can figure out what is wrong with it.