

Berkeley and Abstract Ideas

By John Marchessault

Abstract ideas

- On abstract ideas, Berkeley believes it is an error of our minds to create abstract ideas from what is in the world

- Example:

The mind observes Peter, James, and John, and takes away the commonalities of each, but ignores what is “peculiar to each.” (AW 440)

Particulars (sensible qualities)

- “We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter, as all are abstractions.”
- Berkeley would believe that he can have sensory ideas of a man standing in front of him, but they do not correspond to any abstract idea of what “man” is.
- He believes in the particulars

Locke's Mathematics

- Locke bases his certainty of mathematical knowledge on theorems.
- He admits that general, abstract terms rely on certain sensational experiences of those objects, and relies on the ability to generalize for mathematics.
- “A general idea of man is made, not by any new addition, but only...by leaving out the shape, and some other properties signified by the name man, and retaining only a body, with life, sense, and spontaneous motion, comprehended under the name animal” (III.III.8, AW 378a).

Triangle

- “What is more easy than for anyone to look a little into his own thoughts and there try whether he has or can attain to have, an idea that shall correspond with the description that is here given the general idea of a triangle, which is neither oblique nor rectangular, equilateral, isosceles, nor scalene, but all and none of these at once?” (AW 442-443)

Infinite Divisibility

- Berkeley believes there is no real content in forming abstract ideas about something that is not experienced as a sensation.
- Thus, to suppose that something is infinitely divisible is absurd
- “There is no such thing as the ten-thousandth part of an inch; but there is of a mile or diameter of the earth, which may be signified by that inch (Principles 127)

Infinite Divisibility

- You can only put your fingers so close together before they touch each other.
- You cannot divide the space between the fingers, into infinitely small parts



Finally,

- The main source for these errors in creating abstract general ideas-
Language
- “it is thought that every name has or ought to have, only one precise and settle signification, which inclines men to think there are certain abstract, determinate ideas, which constitute the true and only immediate signification, of each general name.” (AW 444)