

LOCKE, BERKELEY AND HUME ON ABSTRACT IDEAS

Phil 105
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Locke on Abstract Ideas

According to Locke, there are two ways of forming abstract ideas: by *mental separation* or by *mental exclusion*.

Mental separation involves separating two ideas in thought. So, for example, in my idea of a particular colored extended thing, I can mentally separate my idea of color from my idea of extension, and thereby mentally construct an abstract idea of color.

Mental exclusion involves mentally leaving out of an idea that which is particular to it, that which distinguishes it from a similar idea. So, for example, I can leave out of my (simple) idea of red what distinguishes it from my (simple) idea of white. In this way, I can single out in my mind what my (simple) ideas of red and white have in common, and thereby mentally construct the (abstract) idea of color. Similarly, I can mentally exclude from my (complex) idea of Peter what distinguishes it from my (complex) idea of Mary, single out in my mind what these (complex) ideas have in common, and thereby mentally construct the (abstract) idea of human.

In one place, Locke thoughtlessly suggests that abstract ideas are both contradictory and indeterminate. He writes, of the abstract idea of a triangle, that it “must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural, nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once” (*Essay* IV.7.9, p. 596).

Berkeley on Abstract Ideas

Berkeley argues that mental separation and mental exclusion are both impossible.

First, Berkeley assumes that what is separable in thought is separable in reality. Thus, if my idea of color were mentally separable from my idea of extension, then it would be possible (in reality) for a colored thing to exist without being extended. But this is impossible. Hence, my idea of color is *not* mentally separable from my idea of extension.

Second, Berkeley claims that it is impossible for us to have indeterminate ideas. For example, it is impossible for me to think of a man that is no particular man, with no particular height, no particular shape, no particular skin color, and so on. Similarly, I cannot think of something extended that has no particular extension, something colored that has no particular color, something shaped that has no particular shape, and so on.

Hume on Abstract Ideas

Hume offers three arguments against abstract ideas, one based on the Converse of the Separability Principle, one based on the Copy Principle, and one based on the Conceivability-to-Possibility Principle.

The Argument from the Separability Principle (THN 1.1.7, paragraph 3)

The Separability Principle: Whatever objects are different in reality are separable in thought.

The Converse Principle: Whatever objects are separable in thought are different in reality. [Similar to Berkeley's first principle above.]

1. The particular length of a line is not different from the line itself.
2. If X is not different from Y, then X and Y are mentally inseparable. [Conv]
- So, 3. The idea of a line is not mentally separable from the idea of its particular length. [1, 2]
- So, 4. It is impossible for us to have an idea of a line that is of no particular length. [That is, any idea of a line is determinate in length.] [3]

The Argument from the Copy Principle (THN 1.1.7, paragraphs 4-5)

1. Ideas are copies of impressions, and hence differ from impressions only in respect of strength and vivacity. [Copy Principle]
2. Every impression has a determinate quantity and quality.
- So, 3. Every idea has a determinate quantity and quality. [1, 2]

The Argument from the Conceivability-to-Possibility Principle (THN 1.1.7, paragraph 6)

1. It is impossible for there to be a triangle with no determinate proportion of sides and angles.
2. Whatever is possible in idea (i.e., conceivable) is possible in reality. [C-to-P]
- So, 3. It is impossible for there to be an idea of an indeterminate triangle. [1,2]
4. Forming an idea of an object (that is F) is the same as forming an idea (that is F).
- So, 5. It is impossible for there to be an indeterminate idea of a triangle. [3,4]