

Berkeley On Universals

John Locke's solution to the problem of universals is that universals are a type of mental entity, an abstract general idea. Locke was a conceptualist as opposed to a realist or a nominalist. Unlike most ideas, however, these ideas do not represent any particular individual object. They represent whole classes or kinds of objects.

Thus, one may have an idea of gold, which does not represent just one individual lump of gold but represents any and all lumps of gold indifferently. This idea is thus a universal because it may be truthfully predicated in the same way of any and all individuals in the class of golden things. These ideas he calls *abstract general ideas*. Locke says:

"Ideas are general when they are set up as representatives of many particular things {They} are all of them particular in their existence ... their general nature being nothing but the capacity they are put into, by the understanding, of signifying or representing many particulars" *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book III, Ch 3, Sec 13.

Berkeley attacks Locke's theory of Abstract Ideas . Some of the main points in Berkeley's critique of Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas are as follows:

- * Locke speaks of the process of forming ideas as difficult. But even children seem to do it easily and at an early age.

- * Locke speaks of the formation of abstract ideas as if it were a process that is done deliberately and consciously. Do we in fact ever form such ideas deliberately or consciously?

- * Can Locke's kind of abstract idea be formed at all? Can one form an idea which is simply the idea "of a triangle" or "of an animal" or "of color", without the idea of the triangle, animal or color being of any definite type? When we actually consider our idea of a triangle or of an animal, it is always an idea of some specific type of triangle or angle.

* Since *all things are particular in their existence*, so must ideas be particular in their existence. Only a *mental image* could be an idea, but Locke's abstract ideas are supposed to have all those elements that make them represent exactly one object removed or subtracted. Hence, Locke's abstract ideas would not be particular in their existence. But this is impossible since no such mental image is conceivable

* There is no such operation as framing a positive conception such as "Motion" apart from any particular kind of motion but corresponding to all kinds of motion.

*Locke's theory of abstract ideas requires that one mentally separate *all specific traits or qualities* from ideas of particulars. But such traits and qualities cannot exist separately and so cannot be conceived as separated from particulars.

*It should be recognized that, as Locke says, language, especially scientific language and the language required for all logical reasoning, would be impossible without general terms but general terms cannot be explained by means of the theory that they are terms which express abstract ideas in Locke's sense.

*There is no such operation as mentally separating traits and qualities in ideas from those ideas. The most that can be done is "Considering" - "as when I consider some particular parts or qualities separated from others, with which, though they are united in some object, yet it is possible they may really exist without them" (*Principles*, Intro., p. 10). The examples Berkeley gives here is that of imagining someone without one of their eyes or without their nose. But this is not abstraction in the sense that Locke presents.

* Given the quote above from Locke's Essay, it seems that Berkeley's own theory of how ideas may become general develops some of Locke's own thinking on this point. The mind has the power of confining its attention to only certain aspects of the concrete, particular idea. It can focus its consideration of a particular concrete isosceles triangle without paying special attention to the equality of the angles or sides. The *idea remains particular in its own nature* but becomes

general in its signification, since it *indifferently connotes* all particulars of the same sort. Without removing any of Jones' particular traits, one may *consider* him precisely insofar as he is a man, by directing attention to *those aspects in him which hold equally of any other particular men*. The universality of such ideas is their acquired function of indifferently representing any and all of a class of particulars.

* Locke himself said that only particulars exist, so any idea must be a particular in its own nature. According to Berkeley, Locke was misled by the occurrence in our language of general terms to suppose that there must be something in the mind corresponding to each general term. Locke was also misled by assuming that the primary purpose of language is to communicate information.

*We may ask of Berkeley, how and why can the operations of considering and signifying be validly performed? On what grounds is one *justified* in attending to a certain group of traits, making no mention of the others?

Some parts of Berkeley's analysis have positive value, whatever one may say about the rest of his critique of Locke.

Berkeley may be right to maintain that Language does have many functions besides that of communicating factual information.

Berkeley may be right to deny that each person thinks of the same image each time s/he uses a general term. Often one has no image in mind at all.

Berkeley in one place says that what is really important in accounting for the meaningfulness of many general terms is not having ideas but knowing the terms' verbal definition. This suggests an operational theory of meaning but Berkeley did not develop such a theory. He himself gives no account of meaning that does not involve having an occurrent idea. He alludes to a kind of knowing without having ideas and he called it having a "notion". For example, he says, one has no idea of

the mind or of God but one does have notions of them. He gives no explanation of “notions”.