Berkeley’s Anti-Abstractionism

(Margaret Atherton)

Aims & Summary of the Argument

• Atherton’s aim is to show the central place of Berkeley’s views on abstract ideas within the context of the Principles as a whole.

Response to Issues Raised

• Berkeley’s views on the formation of abstract ideas seem to involve visualisation, but there are all sorts of things about which we can have ideas (eg. of the famous chiliagon) without being able to visualise them.¹

Detailed Argument²

Introduction

• It is popularly supposed that Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism is merely a correction of Locke’s views on how general terms like ‘triangle’ stand for triangles. However, this doesn’t fit in with the location of Berkeley’s polemic at the start of the Principles and his treating his other views as resting upon it. Writers tend to blame Berkeley for exaggerating the importance for his immaterialism of his theory of abstract ideas. However, Atherton thinks the argument can be given its proper place provided the focus on triangles is played down.

Section I

• The discussion about abstract ideas is usually taken to be about meaning. Locke is understood as arguing that particular instances of triangles are recognised by their conformity with a template called an abstract general idea, while Berkeley is taken as denying this and asserting that words apply directly to things in the world without any intermediation.

• The problem with this view is that Locke held no such theory of meaning. The focus on triangles obscures Locke’s distinction between real and nominal essences – since triangles are mixed modes, for them the two essences are the same. It is possible that Berkeley misunderstood Locke or was attacking someone else, but this doesn’t explain the pivotal role Berkeley claimed for his anti-abstractionism since the relation of words to the world is a parochial matter. Science will say much the same things whether triangles are picked out directly or by reference to an abstract idea, but Berkeley viewed abstract ideas as destructive to the progress of science. The supposition that the mind frames abstract ideas is seen as one of the worst sources of error, indeed all the errors exposed in the text of the

¹ However, Atherton has an aside on p. 299 to the effect that Berkeley cannot be assuming that ideas are images (as he’s talking about thinking things, which cannot be “imaged”).
² Note : review this in the light of Atherton’s footnotes.
Principles. However, no-one believes in the continued existence of unperceived objects on the basis of meaning.

- Anti-abstractionism is the foundation of the argument in Principles §§4-6 that the being of a sensible thing depends on its being perceived. In Principles §5, Berkeley sees abstractionism as being the source of the view that things can exist unperceived and in Principles §§10-11 of the parity of primary and secondary qualities – that extension and motion can, by abstraction, be imagined apart from other sensible qualities like colour. The summary passage Principles §99 gives Berkeley’s view that all the sensory modalities of objects – whether of primary or secondary qualities - are blended, cannot be abstracted from one another and cannot exist outside of a mind. He rejects the two-fold abstraction of extension, firstly from other sensible qualities and secondly from perception.

- So, Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism is central to both his immaterialism and idealism.

Section II

- The presumption that Berkeley is addressing a theory of meaning stems from the assumption that he is objecting to abstract general ideas (such as that of the famous triangle). However, Berkeley does not object to generalising but only to abstraction. These are different faculties – abstraction involves the separation of properties while generalisation involves noting properties shared by many different instances. He objects not to general ideas but to abstract general ideas.

- However, Berkeley doesn’t concern himself just with abstract general ideas but with the generally illegitimate process of abstraction and §§7-10 of the Introduction to the Principles contain several examples. In §7 he refers to the mind’s alleged capacity to abstract qualities from things where these qualities are in fact irrevocably blended together. We can have, according to Berkeley, no idea of what colour or extension is like exclusive of the other properties that support them.

- In §8 Berkeley moves on to the illegitimate separation of a quality from its sensory determinates. He deals with the general abstract idea of extension abstracted from any particular dimensions, shape or size. The mistake he sees is the same as before – that of supposing we can get an idea of extension exclusive of the ways of being extended.

- In §9 he treats bodies in like manner, where the abstract idea of, say, man, is compounded of other abstract ideas (colour, motion, etc) isolated from the conditions in which they actually exist. Errors in forming the general abstract idea of a triangle resolve into prior errors in forming abstract ideas of the components from which it is made up.

- Berkeley describes a legitimate abstraction in §10, that of imagining the separation of things that are in reality separable and self-standing, as the eye from the body. This is distinguished from illegitimate abstraction, that of an eye with no colour³, which Berkeley considers inconceivable.

³ Atherton claims that this illegitimate use resolves itself into the first, legitimate, use, though I don’t understand what she means.
Section III

- Why does Berkeley find it inconceivable to form such abstract ideas? He does not argue the case but challenges the reader to perform a thought experiment: any attempt to frame an abstract idea is bound to fail. Why is Berkeley so sure of this? A response (by Winkler and Pitcher) is that Berkeley has intuitions about entities or states of affairs whose existence is impossible and concluded that ideas of such impossible entities are themselves inconceivable. However, this notion undermines the use of anti-abstractionism in the body of the Principles; if Berkeley has to know which states of affairs are impossible in order to know which are inconceivable, he can't urge the involvement of abstraction as the reason why these states are impossible. Either impossibility or inconceivability has to have priority, not a vicious circle of both.

- To escape from the circle we must note that Berkeley is making claims about abstract ideas, not about anything supposedly underlying these ideas. Hence, he can suppose that such ideas are impossible if consideration of the mental processes and faculties involved in forming ideas precludes them. Berkeley begins his argument by claiming common consent to the notion that existent qualities are always mixed rather than existing separately (Principles, Introduction, §7), so that we don't experience isolated qualities but things in which the qualities are mixed together. Even when using a single sense modality such as vision, our experience is both coloured and extended. To frame an abstract idea of pure extension we would need to peel away the colour from the experienced coloured expanse, thus disindividuating the expanse. Berkeley considers such an idea contentless, because it's the colour that enables us to visualise extension. Berkeley does allow selective attention – ie. of focusing on the extension rather than the colour – but not of thinking of extension were colour annihilated. Which qualities can be separated depends on how we experience things, so Berkeley allows the notion of a rose without scent, even though all roses have scent, because the smell is not co-ordinated with other ways of perceiving the rose.

- If we were to try to frame an abstract idea of extension in general, we would have to peel away all qualities that differentiate one instance of extension from another – but such a process can't be followed as it removes all ways in which a thing can be extended; the nature of our experience precludes it. Inconceivability of ideas proves their impossibility as the way ideas exist is by being conceived. Berkeley is speaking purely about ideas, not about the states of affairs theses ideas are supposed to be about, so is not making claims about what things are impossible. His only claim about things is that they consist of qualities blended together, which is how we experience them.

- This understanding of Berkeley's anti-abstractionism explains the key role it plays in the body of the Principles as his rejection of (1) unperceived existence, (2) of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and (3) of extended movable substance all depend on the inconceivability of abstractions. Hence (1) Berkeley’s claim that sensible qualities can’t exist unperceived is a special case of his claim that we can’t conceive separately what we don’t experience separately. Unperceived sensible qualities lack content and so are inconceivable, because sensible qualities occur only in the context of being perceived, from which they cannot be separated. Qualities like redness, warmth or pain are ways perceivers take things to be and so exist only in the context of perception. It is therefore unintelligible to claim that we can separate ways of being aware from acts of...
awareness and suppose we can have ideas of redness etc. existing unperceived. This is spelt out in Dialogue 1 of the Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous – an expansion of the anti-abstraction arguments in the Principles - where Hylas is convinced that he cannot have ideas of heat outside of the context of someone’s awareness. This depends on the assumption that we can only know what heat is like as it is felt. Talk of heat in an unfeeling body is an attempt to frame an idea without legitimate content.

- (2) The argument against the distinction between primary and secondary qualities depends on the principle that sensible qualities not experienced separately cannot be conceived to exist separately. I cannot take primary qualities as mind-independent but secondary qualities as mind-dependent because I cannot conceive of a body with extension (a primary quality) without colour (a secondary quality). In turn (3) the rejection of the primary / secondary quality distinctions, as well as prior argument rejecting extension-in-general and motion-in-general independent of sensation as contentless, undermines belief in extended movable material substances.

- In all this, Berkeley is not trying to show anything about the nature or existence of unperceived objects. His point is that, as we can’t conceive of such objects, we can’t make sense of the materialist claims about their existence. The materialist who claims to be able to isolate ideas of primary qualities and use these to describe a mind-independent world is speaking not falsely but unintelligibly.

- As has already been noted, in Principles §99, Berkeley points out the two-fold abstraction underlying materialist mechanism. The assumption is that appeal to entities possessing a limited number of (primary) qualities is sufficient to explain the full range of our experience. In turn, this requires us to be able to abstract the primary extra-mental qualities from the others and further to abstract some of our ideas from the context of awareness so that these ideas can be used to describe this extra-mental reality that is said to be responsible for our ideas. Berkeley’s target is not so much Locke’s triangle but passages from Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy where Descartes explicitly claims that anyone paying attention can understand extension without figure or motion. Berkeley thinks, in Dialogues §193, that while mathematicians may treat of quantity without thinking of sensible qualities that attend it, when they contemplate the bare ideas it will not be the pure abstracted ideas of extension that they entertain. Berkeley denies that we can have any idea of extension separated from sensory-based qualities.

Section IV

- Locke’s triangle is involved in the argument not because Berkeley is attacking a theory of meaning, but because it provides a “killing blow” to the theory of abstract ideas. Locke admits, in Essay IV.vii.9, that the general idea of a triangle of no particular shape involves an idea of something imperfect that cannot exist and which involves the combination of several inconsistent ideas. Berkeley recognises (according to Winkler) that Locke’s purpose is to omit the distinguishing features of particular triangles in his general idea, rather than try to add together inconsistent ones. So, why does Berkeley think abstract general ideas are contradictory? Atherton claims it is because Berkeley views a general triangle, whose sides have no particular length, as inconceivable, as it cannot exist (as Locke noted).
• Berkeley is not arguing against abstraction by selective attention. Is this Locke’s point? Berkeley admits (Principles, Introduction, §16) that we can attend to a figure as triangular without attending to the particular angles and lengths, just as we can consider a particular person as human. What he denies is that we can form general abstract ideas of “triangle” or “human being” where our ideas are illegitimately extended beyond the conditions of perceiving.

• Atherton now turns her attention to Berkeley’s Alciphron, in which he draws distinctions between what is useful in science and what is real. Berkeley thinks the mind makes progress in science by the skilful management of signs such as force or number. Berkeley thinks that the concept of force is useful in its context, but cannot be applied to an underlying reality independent of sensible bodies and their sensible effects. Similarly, though a scientist may describe imperceptible things such as the corpuscles of materialist mechanism, there are just a model. We must not imagine we have uncovered anything about the underlying nature of things. Berkeley’s corpuscles would be characterised by both secondary and primary qualities.

• The scope of Berkeley’s agreement or disagreement with Locke depends not on what Locke has to say about our ideas of triangles but of his more complex views on the nature of reality. It may be that Locke’s views on primary qualities are only to do with selective attention, so sparing them from Berkeley’s strictures, though Locke’s talk of substance is something that Berkeley would rule out. Berkeley doesn’t like Locke’s use of “being in general” on which depends Locke’s support for mind-independent material substance. Progress in the sciences is impeded, according to Berkeley, by positing an underlying extra-mental reality independent of perception.

• Atherton closes by noting that understanding Berkeley as attacking Locke’s triangle as his main anti-abstractionist target both misunderstands Berkeley’s intentions and also obscures some of the similarities between Locke and Berkeley.