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Berkeley Newsletter

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At first glance it seems reasonable to believe that when Berkeley was writing the *Principles of Human Knowledge* he understood his case against abstract ideas to be crucial to his case against matter and for immaterialism. After all he devoted much of the Introduction to the *Principles* to opposing abstraction, and the point of the *Principles* is in large part to defend immaterialism. And very near the beginning of the main body of the *Principles*, Berkeley tells us that "[i]f we thoroughly examine... [the view that] houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them unperceived?" (P 4, 5.)

There is no doubt that Berkeley opposed abstract ideas and defended immaterialism. But on the question of the relationship between the attack on the one view and the defense of the other, there are about as many theories as there are theorists. Even among those who think that the case against abstraction is designed to contribute to the case for immaterialism there is no agreement about how the former case is supposed to contribute to the latter. The variety of views on this topic really is remarkable. In probing them we enter territory that has been visited by many explorers; but the landscape, and even its dominant features, has seemed quite different to each explorer. My aim, in part, is to outline some of the very different interpretations of this difficult aspect of Berkeley's thought that have recently been advanced. I also make a comment or two along the way about the merits of each reading. Much of the work I report on is complex and multi-faceted and I will focus solely on what I take to be the central moves pertaining to the matter at hand. So I will not bother constantly reminding the reader that I am ignoring much that the author under discussion has to say.

Berkeley contended, of course, that the view that there are abstract ideas is also somehow implicated in the belief that something can have extension without color, a claim he also thought to be mistaken and repugnant. Various other mistaken views are also linked, and sometimes seem to be traced, to the belief in abstract ideas at, for example, *Principles* 11, 13, and 17. The belief in abstract ideas has, Berkeley says, "occasioned innumerable errors and difficulties in almost all parts of knowledge." (I (Introduction to the *Principles*), 6.) But I will focus on the link between the case against abstract ideas and the case against materialism and for immaterialism.
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There are various conditions that any satisfactory account of this link must satisfy. A plausible account will explain why Berkeley devoted the Introduction to the Principles to the critique of abstraction. It will avoid, for example, the implication that he was confused in doing so. A plausible theory will impute to Berkeley only views that are such that we have independent evidence for his acceptance of them, or at least that otherwise fit well with his system. It will also be consistent with the fact that Berkeley has a number of independent arguments against matter and that the topic of abstraction is not mentioned at all in many of them. A plausible theory should probably also be universally applicable in the sense that it accounts for, or at least illuminates, how it is that the vulgar, and not just the learned, are mistaken in believing there to be mind-independent objects. However, I will not here attempt to evaluate systematically in these respects each of the accounts that I mention.

Pappas: a premise in an argument

George Pappas argues that the case against abstract ideas is a crucial premise in Berkeley's defense of immaterialism. (In fact he defends the stronger claim that the two theses -- that there are no abstract ideas and that esse is percipi -- entail each other.) There are, he suggests, two independent reasons why the case against abstraction is crucial for the defense of immaterialism. One arises from Berkeley's wish to undermine a certain argument, (A), and the other arises from his wish to advance another argument, (B). I will consider these in turn.

Pappas believes that Berkeley needs to oppose abstract ideas in order to undermine the following argument (A) that his philosophical opponents will otherwise be in a position to advance, and that, if successful, would refute Berkeley's entire philosophy:

(1) If there are abstract general ideas, then the esse is percipi thesis is false.
(2) There are abstract general ideas. 
Therefore, 
(3) The esse is percipi thesis is false.

Actually it is the abstract idea of existence, and not just any alleged abstract idea, that would have the undesirable result mentioned in (1). Strictly speaking, therefore, the first premise actually is not (1) but (4):

(4) If there is an abstract general idea of existence, then the esse is percipi thesis is false.

So we should not read (1) to say that if there are any abstract general ideas, then the esse is percipi thesis is false. Instead we should read (1) to mean that if there are abstract general ideas of all of the sorts that Berkeley believed his opponents to think there to be, then the esse is percipi thesis is false. As Pappas notes, Berkeley believed that Locke thought there to be an abstract idea of existence. (As he also notes, Berkeley sometimes traces some of the errors of his opponents to a belief in an abstract idea of existence: see, e.g. Berkeley to Johnson, Works, Vol. II, 293.)

When Berkeley argues that there are no abstract ideas at all, one of his purposes is to show that there is no abstract idea of existence. So at least on this count, the imputation to Berkeley of an attempt to undermine (A) is not unreasonable although he is of course concerned to oppose numerous other abstract ideas in addition to the abstract idea of existence.

But there are problems here. In particular, what reason is there to believe (4)? Pappas reasons as follows. He asks us to imagine someone seeing a red, heavy, square-shaped table, and then engaging in a series of abstractions of the sort that Berkeley's opponents believed in, first abstracting the abstract general idea of a table and then abstracting the abstract general idea of existence. Combining these, one would now have the abstract general idea of existing table. This idea, writes Pappas,

would be incomprehensible, for Berkeley, because such an idea would have the general quality existence and the general quality being a table. ... And [if one had abstract ideas of this sort] the esse is percipi thesis would be false. For there would in some sense be (exist) a sensible object (the general quality being a table), though no table would be perceived when one attended to or conceived this abstract general idea. (Pappas 55.)

These remarks are puzzling. Pappas says that if someone has the abstract general idea of an existing table, then esse is percipi is false because in that case there is a sensible object which no-one is perceiving. But why think that the abstract general idea of an existing table would be sensible or would even have anything sensible about it? There is no more reason to think that the abstract idea of an existent table is sensible than there is to think that the abstract idea of a red table is sensible.

Pappas says that Berkeley senses in P, 4 and P, 5 that he needs to protect himself against (A) and that by opposing (2) he is attempting to do so. There is no doubt that in these sections of the Principles Berkeley means to connect the issue of abstraction with the rejection of matter, but it is not clear that he means to do so in the proposed fashion. More generally, I do not see that there is much of a textual basis for attributing to Berkeley an assault on this particular argument.

On Pappas's reading, Berkeley's attack on abstract ideas also provides the crucial second premise in the following positive argument, (B):
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(5) The esse is percipi thesis is false only if there are abstract general ideas.
(6) There are no abstract general ideas. Therefore, (7) The esse is percipi thesis is true.

If this is an argument that Berkeley advances, it is clear that he has an argument for immaterialism in which his case against abstraction serves as a premise.

Pappas takes these remarks from P5 to support this interpretation:

If we thoroughly examine [the tenet that sensible objects have an existence distinct from their being perceived], it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived?

Pappas rightly says that the second sentence in this passage asserts that (8) to conceive a sensible object existing unperceived is to conceive (attend to) an abstract general idea.

However, it does not follow that Berkeley means to argue for (7) on the basis of (5) and (6). This can be seen as follows. Someone who asserts (8) may think that the truth of (8) can be established only by showing (by arguments that do not appeal to the case against abstract ideas) that esse is percipi. On that view it becomes clear that to think that there can be existence without perception is to engage in abstraction when, and only when, it is established that esse is percipi. In that case someone is in a position to assert (5) only if he has shown that esse is percipi.

It is abundantly clear that Berkeley accepted (6) and (7) and fairly clear that he accepted (5). Moreover, (7) follows from (5) and (6). Nevertheless there is reason to doubt that we should impute (B) to Berkeley. It is not clear that he thought that he could show that (7) is true by appealing to (5) and (6). Everything that Berkeley says in P5 and in surrounding sections of P is consistent with the claim that Berkeley would accept that he is in a position to assert (5) only if he independently establishes (7). It may be that (B) is a strand in Berkeley's thinking; but I do not think that Pappas has shown that this is so.

Atherton: the impossibility of a certain sort of mental separation
Margaret Atherton shares Pappas's view that the critique of abstraction is intended by Berkeley to support immaterialism. However, she argues that too much emphasis has been put on Berkeley's opposition to abstract general ideas: this is not the aspect of the critique of abstraction that matters for Berkeley's larger philosophy. Rather, what matters is abstraction in the sense of "analyzing or separating qualities, properties, or attributes from each other..." (Atherton 47.) Atherton thinks that this process is one that Berkeley considers to be behind the error he means to expose in I, 7 as well as the error he means to expose in I, 8 although only the latter section concerns general ideas. She says that "analyzing or separating qualities, properties or attributes from each other, should be distinguished from generalizing, from taking such properties or attributes to be shared by many different instances". (Atherton 47.) On her reading I, 7 concerns the separation of ideas of particular qualities and I, 8 concerns the separation of ideas of general qualities.

In Atherton's view, Berkeley's crucial relevant claim is that "separate ideas of qualities which don't exist in separation are ideas that are inconceivable". Since all putative abstract ideas, including those that are general, are allegedly formed by separation, and even their advocates are understood by Berkeley to think of abstract ideas as ideas of qualities that do not exist separately, this is in effect to say that all abstract ideas are inconceivable.

Atherton believes that Berkeley's emphasis is on the impossibility of going through the process of framing or conceiving such ideas and that his central move is to say that it is impossible to conceive separately what is not experienced in separation. Since we cannot conceive as existing apart qualities that always exist together in experience, and since in our experience sensible qualities are never experienced as unperceived -- which is just to say that when we experience them, we perceive them -- we can not conceive of sensible qualities existing apart from perception. (Likewise since we experience primary and secondary qualities mixed up together in our experience, we can not conceive of primary qualities existing without secondary qualities.) So what Berkeley actually sets out to provide is not a case against mind-independent objects but rather a case against our conceiving of such objects. (Atherton 52.) As she notes, if in order to show that you can not conceive of x separately from y, you have to show that x could not exist apart from y, then the appeal to what we are capable of abstracting can not contribute anything to the case against mind-independent existence.

Atherton rejects the claim that Berkeley is arguing from the impossibility of a certain sort of object to the inconceivability of an idea of it; nor is Berkeley, on her reading, asking us to introspect to see whether we can conceive of the relevant ideas; nor is Berkeley assuming that all ideas are images. Rather, his view is that we are to discern what is conceivable by examining the "conditions of experience" and, in particular, by noting that things "consist of qualities blended together" and that this is how we experience them. (Atherton 51.)
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Atherton's emphasis on the impossibility of a certain sort of mental separation is important. And she may be right that there are certain thoughts that the materialist understands himself to have but that Berkeley considers unthinkable. (However, if these include the thought that the physical world exists apart from perception, it is puzzling that Berkeley thought this to be "an opinion strangely prevailing": if it is prevailing then people have it, as distinct from thinking that they have it. Perhaps, when he goes on to say that this opinion is contradictory, we should read Berkeley as saying that it is in fact not a genuine thought, so that, in the final analysis, those who think they have it are mistaken.) Atherton may be right too in her view that when he deploys the case against abstract ideas, Berkeley means only to show that it is impossible for us to conceive of mind-independent objects, as distinct from showing that there are no such objects or that such objects are impossible.

But I do not agree with Atherton's characterization of the process she takes Berkeley to deny to be possible. She emphasizes what she calls the "conditions of experience" (Atherton 51.) and she says that Berkeley's view is that "it is impossible to conceive separately what isn't experienced in separation". But the mistake is not to conceive separately what we do not experience as existing apart. For we can conceive of as existing apart many qualities that always exist together in experience: thus I have never had the experience of finding the roof of my house detached from the rest of the house, but I can easily conceive of that occurrence.

Perhaps the pivotal claim is that we can not conceive separately what can not exist apart. ("I deny that I can abstract one from another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated..." (1, 10)) But here another problem has to be faced. A materialist can endorse this claim wholeheartedly and then go on to argue that sensible things can exist apart from perception and that we can conceive of them as existing apart. Here we have an impasse. How is Berkeley to show that he is right and that we can not conceive of mind-independent objects? How is he to show that physical objects and their perception are (so to speak) two things that we experience together but that can not be conceived apart, unlike, say, my house and the roof of my house, which are also experienced together but can be conceived apart? If he argues that the very idea of an unperceived physical object is contradictory, this seems to be a claim that stands or falls on its own: the critique of abstract ideas will not help to show it to be true.

Suppose the pivotal claim were that we can not conceive of x and y separately if x and y can not be experienced apart. (Atherton's mention of "conditions of experience" and other remarks that she makes suggest this idea.) For this claim to be relevant to the case against mind-independent objects it must apply when y is the perception of x: for the claim has to be that we can not conceive of objects existing apart from perception because objects can not be experienced apart from their perception. That is, since we can not experience separately an object and our perception of that object, we can not conceive of an object existing apart from our experience of it.

From Berkeley's point of view this line of thought has the advantage that it would provide him with a way to argue against our being able to conceive of mind-independent existence. But it raises various questions, including these two. First, what reason is there to think that we can not conceive of x and y separately if x and y can not be experienced apart? Second, is this claim true in cases in which y is the experience of x? When applied in this context it has the result that nothing that we experience be conceived of as existing apart from our experience of it. If we experience other spirits, perhaps by perceiving ideas that they have elicited in us, this appears to create problems for Berkeley.

Dancy: The Diagnosis of the Character of an Error
Jonathan Dancy suggests that we should take a very different approach. He suggests that Berkeley appeals to what he has established about abstraction to explain why people have adopted various beliefs that Berkeley wishes to oppose and believes to be mistaken, such as the belief that sensible objects can exist unperceived, or the belief that one can conceive of primary qualities existing apart from secondary qualities. The point of the case against abstraction is not to show that the beliefs in question are mistaken; that has to be established separately. On this reading the case against abstraction is not part of an argument for Berkeley's metaphysical views. Let's call Dancy's view the "diagnosis view", since it reads the case against abstraction to have as its purpose a diagnosis of the character of the error that Berkeley believes his opponents to make.

Dancy observes that if the diagnosis view is correct, you would expect Berkeley to provide independent arguments against the relevant mistaken views of his opponents. And so he does. For example, an independent argument against the claim that sensible things have an existence apart from their being perceived is offered in P3. However we should note that the presence of independent arguments provides, at best, weak evidence for the diagnosis view. For Berkeley may wish to present a number of arguments against the views of his opponents. Consequently the presence of independent arguments does not suffice to show that Berkeley's appeal to the case against abstraction has as its purpose a diagnosis of the nature of an error made by his opponents as distinct from an attempt to launch an argument against the views of those opponents.

But can the diagnosis of an error not easily be transformed into an argument? It is of course possible to show that certain beliefs have been adopted due to the influence of ideas that are problematic (or views that are mistaken, or reasoning that is defective, etc.) without thereby showing that the
beliefs in question are false. However, to show that if you adopt a certain belief you thereby inevitably engage in a certain piece of faulty reasoning (or are, say, inevitably in a psychological or cognitive state that is somehow problematic) is in effect also to show that the belief in question is unacceptable. In that case making the diagnosis suffices to refute the relevant belief. And Berkeley does think that anyone who makes an assertion of a certain sort — that there are mind-independent objects, for example — is making a mistake of a certain sort that he has explained. So, if the diagnosis view, as he deploys it, is correct, doesn’t Berkeley have available to him an argument against mind-independent objects, so that Dancy’s distinction between the diagnosis view and the more conventional views is in effect beside the point? (If this were so, Berkeley would have had at his disposal an argument against matter that is based on the case against abstract ideas, although it would not follow that he actually deploys it.)

An advocate of the Diagnosis view need not go along with this, however. For it may be that Berkeley can show that to believe that there are mind-independent objects is to abstract only by deploying an independent argument against the possibility of mind-independent objects. The independent argument in question might be the "Master argument" or the argument at the beginning of the Principles to the effect that an object is a set of qualities and that qualities are just ideas, or by showing that it is contradictory to believe that there are mind-independent objects. The diagnosis, in other words, may be "after the fact".

Dancy characterizes the particular error that he understands Berkeley to be diagnosing as follows: "We have supposed that because we can think about size without thinking about shape, we can conceive of something as having a certain size without conceiving of it as having some shape, and so on. But we are mistaken because nothing could be like that." (Dancy, 36-7.) So the error (that Berkeley means to diagnose by pointing out that it involves abstraction) is to think that because we can selectively attend to, say, the motion of something, we can also conceive of it as having motion without conceiving of it as having, e.g., extension or figure or color.

If the alleged error here is the mistake of inferring a conclusion about abstraction from an observation about selective attention, it is an error that only the (very) learned will be in a position to make. But it need not be thought of in that way. It may rather involve jumping to the conclusion that x and y can exist separately in virtue of the fact that we can selectively attend to x without y; making this mistake would not require having any thoughts about selective attention or having any other such concept that only the learned are likely to have. In any case, even if Dancy is wrong about the precise error that Berkeley means to expose, he may be right that the role of the case against abstraction is to reveal the nature of a mistake that believers in matter make — a mistake that has to be shown independently to be made.

Of course someone might think that Berkeley has these two aspects to his thinking: on the one hand he wants to diagnose an error that his opponents are making; and on the other hand he wants to use the case against abstract ideas as part of an argument against matter. Martha Brandt Bolton attributes this combination of views to Berkeley.

Bolton: ideas are their objects

Martha Brandt Bolton argues that once you understand Berkeley’s theory of ideas, it becomes clear that the critique of abstraction is directly relevant to the defense of immaterialism. She says that the theory of ideas is central both to the attack on abstract ideas and to Berkeley’s idealist metaphysics.

Bolton’s work contains hints of the psychological reading proposed by Dancy: thus she says that Berkeley thinks that the belief in abstraction has encouraged various mistaken opinions. But Bolton also says that Berkeley uses the impossibility of abstract ideas as a “positive argument” for the mind-independence of sensible things. (Bolton 71.)

What is it about Berkeley’s theory of ideas that is relevant? Bolton’s answer has two closely related parts. First, objects of cognition are not represented by ideas but rather are ideas. As she puts it, “the intrinsic object of an idea is just the idea itself.” (“Berkeley took for granted that to think about an object is to have an idea in mind, but he maintains that the object is the idea.”) Bolton thinks that what precludes abstraction is this identification of ideas and their objects, according to which an idea has the features of its object. Since ideas are objects, they are wholly determinate and they can not have contradictory properties; that is, they have to satisfy the conditions of an existent object. Since an abstract idea would be an idea of something impossible, it too, being its own object, is impossible. For example, if there were an abstract idea of a triangle, it would be an idea of a triangle without angles of any particular size. But there could not be a triangle without angles of any particular size.

Second, Berkeley holds that the objects that we think about are fully known by us. (This is so because the objects that we think about are ideas, and ideas are fully known to us.) On Bolton’s reading, “there is no ontological difference between an idea and its (intrinsic) object and thus an idea does not ‘include’ features that partially characterize its object.” (Bolton 74.) An abstract idea would be a partial conception of a thing that conforms to that idea. Such an idea would in fact give a partial characterization to which any number of things may conform. Consequently abstract ideas are impossible. The selective attention, or restriction of concentration, that Berkeley allows does not face this difficulty: the idea that I have when I selectively attend to the brownness of the desk before me, for example, does not involve a partial characterization of the desk (as a whole). Nor does my idea of a part of the desk that can exist apart from the rest of the desk: an idea of a leg of the desk.
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is just that, a conception of a leg of the desk. It is not a conception of the whole desk.

What is the connection with immaterialism? Since ideas and their objects are the same, "[an] unconceived, mind-independent sensible object is literally unthinkable". Bolton considers the removal of the distinction between ideas and their objects to provide the crucial link between abstraction and immaterialism.

Bolton is certainly right that, in Berkeley's view, objects consist of ideas; and we sense and imagine ideas. But I am not at all convinced by her central claims. First, within Berkeley's philosophy, it is possible (and necessary) to distinguish between an idea and its object. This is so, for example, in the case of an idea of a particular object. Thus, on Berkeley's view, the idea of the Eiffel Tower that I now have while sitting in Central Illinois is distinct from, and no part of, the actual Eiffel Tower, even though the Eiffel Tower has no existence apart from the minds of perceivers. And even if I am gazing at the Eiffel Tower, the ideas of sense that I then have will be constituents of the Eiffel Tower; they will not be the Eiffel Tower. In neither case, and in particular when I am merely remembering or imagining an object, does Berkeley identify an idea of an object and the object. So Bolton's remark that "Berkeley took for granted that to think about an object is to have an idea in mind, and the object is the idea" (Bolton 68.) is wrong.

Second, while Berkeley collapses the distinction between ideas and their objects and holds that ideas are fully known, (Bolton 69.) it does not follow that objects are fully known whenever we perceive them, or even that they are ever fully known by us. My idea of the apple before me includes features that do not characterize the object as a whole. Thus my idea of the apple as shiny or red does not characterize many parts of the apple, including all those parts under its skin. Since within Berkeley's system we have ideas that partially characterize things, this reason for thinking that there can not be an abstract idea is not convincing.

Third, it is not clear what is to prevent someone from thinking both that ideas are their objects and that there are abstract ideas. Bolton says that "if an idea has been identified with its own object, then evidently the idea is impossible if its object is, and the properties of the idea coincide exactly with those of its object." (Bolton 70.) But if an idea is its own object it seems wrongheaded to argue that if there can't be an object of which we are having an idea, then there can not be any such idea. This is to reify the idea, try to think of it as an object, and then observe that it would be an object that could not exist. Why not just say that the only object is the idea?

Lastly, it seems that on Bolton's reading, what yields immaterialism is the identification of an idea and its object rather than antiabstractionism. But
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and objects presupposes, I think, that there are no exact resemblances among qualities and is to that extent unsatisfactory.

More to the point, Muehlmann imputes the following argument to Berkeley, an argument whose "entire thrust derives" from the attack on abstract ideas. (Muehlmann 116.) Secondary qualities are mind-dependent. Primary qualities are inseparable from secondary qualities. Therefore, primary qualities are mind-dependent. Muehlmann suggests that the claim that primary qualities are inseparable from secondary qualities depends on the attack on abstract ideas. But there are of course many ways in which the statement that a claim depends on, or derives from, some other claim or argument, can be construed. In any case, even if it is shown that there are no abstract ideas, this will not suffice to show that primary and secondary qualities can not exist apart: it has to be shown somehow that these qualities in particular are such that (unlike, say, your hand and the rest of your body) they can exist apart only if there are abstract ideas.

Much the same problem confronts the claim that only if Berkeley shows that abstract ideas are impossible can he sustain the claim that materialism involves a "manifest contradiction." (Muehlmann 29.) If it is true that materialism involves a contradiction (manifest or not), this must be because the very idea of mind-independent physical objects is contradictory. If this is so, it is so whether or not there are abstract ideas, and whether or not abstract ideas are impossible.

Muehlmann is, however, correct to impute the following argument to Berkeley: by appealing to an argument from relativity to the perceiver, Berkeley attempts to show that specific qualities, such as any particular extension, are in the mind. If he is successful, the only option that is open to the materialist is to argue that what is outside of the mind is, for example, extension in general. And that, Berkeley says, is to invoke an abstract idea. However, it is not clear whether this amounts to an immaterialist argument that has antiabstractionism as a premise.

Conclusion

Dancy is right to construe the case against abstraction as an analysis of the sort of mistake that is made by materialists. And it seems that the mistake in question involves a certain sort of mental separation. It may be that Berkeley also wanted to advance an argument from antiabstractionism to immaterialism. But we have seen flaws in recent attempts to spell out such an argument. The most promising area for further inquiry seems to be the notion of mental separation. But it may be that the only way for Berkeley to show that the particular instance of mental separation involved in materialism involves abstraction is to show independently that materialism is problematic. Lastly, we do well to consider the possibility that Berkeley was not clear in his own

mind about the precise character of the link between antiabstractionism and immaterialism.

1 George S. Pappas "Abstract ideas and the 'esse in percipio' thesis" in David Berman (editor) George Berkeley: Essays and Reprints (Irish Academic Press, 1986), 47-62. (This essay also appeared in Hermeneia CXXXIX (Winter 1985).)

2 Margaret Atherton "Berkeley's Anti-Abstractionism" in Ernest Sosa (ed.) Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley (Routeld, 1987), 45-60.


5 Robert G. Muehlmann makes this point in Berkeley's Ontology (Hackett, 1992), 5ff.


7 Thanks to Jonathan Dancy and Matthew Johnston for comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Conference Announcement

The International Berkeley Society will hold a conference from April 22-24, 1999 in Newport RI at Trinity Church and Whitehall. The theme of the conference is "The Legacy of George Berkeley: From the 18th to the 21st century". Presenters of papers include

Cornelis de Waal, University of Indiana, Indianapolis
David Cleemengson, Rice University
David Morris, Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario
George Pappas, Ohio State University
John Troyer, University of Connecticut
Margaret Atherton, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Nancy Kendrick, Wheaton College, MA
Patrick Kelly, Trinity College Dublin
Rick deWitt, Fairfield University, CT
Scott Breuningr, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Stephen H. Dangel, Texas A & M University
F.K. Williford, The University of Iowa
Lois Eveleth, Salve Regina University
Thomas M. Lennon, The University of Western Ontario
C. George Caffentzis, University of Southern Maine
Lisa Downing, University of Pennsylvania
Ian Tipton, University of Wales Swansea

A number of special events are being planned including a walking tour of historic Newport, a lecture on the paintings of John Smibert, a historic re-enactment of Berkeley's sermons at Trinity Church, a reception at Whitehall and a banquet at Salve Regina University with 18th century music.

For further details contact: Prof. Galen A. Johnson, University of Rhode Island, 401 874-4790,
<gjohnson@uriacc.uri.edu>
L'abbé Raynal, author of an unnoticed review of Berkeley's Dialogues

By Sébastien Charles

The first French translation of Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, by Gué de Malves, was published in 1750. Jessop and, later, Bracken have shown the impact of this translation on the *Siècle des Lumières*. They quote reviews of it that have appeared in the *Mercure de France* in January 1750 and in the *Mémoires de Trévoux* in March of the same year. It seems that an important review may have gone unnoticed by their impressive readers of the same distinguished journals. It was Raynal, who was to become the well-known author of the controversial *Histoire philosophique et politique des Deux Indes*.

After a turbulent youth in the countryside and then in Paris, Raynal began living a more stable life in 1747. In July of that year he began sending, on a regular basis, his *Nouvelles Littéraires* to the Court of Saxe-Gotha. In exchange for money, he became the literary correspondent to the Duchess Dorothea, sending her information about recent publications that he deemed noteworthy. It was Raynal, therefore, who reviewed the new translation of the Dialogues for her, and not Grimm, who was to commence a similar correspondence only in May 1753 and who was slowly to take Raynal’s place. It seems to me that the review reflects Raynal’s ability and intelligence. But readers of the *Berkeley Newsletter* should be left to make their own judgement. Here is Raynal’s text as it is reproduced in Maurice Tourneux’s *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique par Grimm, Diderot, Raynal, Meister, etc.*, followed by a (Modern) English translation:

Il n’est point de paradoxe, quelque étrange qu’on le suppose, auquel l’esprit ne puisse donner une couleur de vraisemblance. C’est ce qu’on peut voir dans le système nouvellement traduit du docteur Berkeley. Ce système, tout absurde qu’il est, trouve, dans un amas de sophismes plus séduisants les uns que les autres, de quoi confondre la raison la plus fine. L’ouvrage est divisé en trois dialogues, dans le premier desquels on s’applique à dépouiller la matière de toutes ses qualités sensibles ; dans le second à démontrer l’impossibilité de son existence ; dans le troisième à répondre aux difficultés que l’on forme contre ce système. L’auteur commence par ôter à la matière les qualités sensibles que le vulgaire lui attribue, tels que le froid, la chaleur, les odeurs, etc. Sa grande raison est fondée sur ce que toutes ces qualités sont des sensations agréables ou douloureuses, lesquelles ne peuvent se trouver dans une substance destinée à la perception. Il passe ensuite aux qualités primitives dont les philosophes enrichissent les corps qui sont l’étendue, la figure, la solidité, etc. ; il prouve que ces dernières ne sont pas plus inhérentes à la matière que ne le sont les autres. « Si elles l’étaient, dit l’auteur, elles devraient être fixes et invariantes comme la matière. Or, puisque ces choses varient selon la diversité des organes et selon le point de vue sous lequel on les perçoit, c’est une preuve qu’elles sont dans nous et non dans la matière. La matière ainsi dépourvue de toutes ses qualités sensibles, que peut-elle être, sinon une substance chimérique ? ». Si vous dites que la matière est le substratum, comme on parle dans l’école, le soutien des qualités sensibles, l’auteur vous demandera à quoi vous êtes redevable de la connaissance de cet être-là. Ce ne peut-être par les sens, car ils n’aperçoivent immédiatement que les modes et les qualités. Ce ne peut donc être que par la voie de la réflexion et de la raison. L’auteur vous attaquera dans ce dernier retraitement avec beaucoup d’avantage, car il vous prouvera que ce substratum doit être répandu sous les qualités sensibles qu’il soutient, et par conséquent sous-entendu, Or, comment ce qui est différent de l’étendue peut-il en être le soutien ? Pour démontrer l’impossibilité de la matière, l’auteur fait revivre toutes les difficultés que les anciens sceptiques faisaient contre le mouvement, l’étendue, la divisibilité de la matière à l’infini ; mais quand même la matière serait possible, elle ne lui paraît nullement propre à entrer dans le plan de Dieu. Car, on ou la regarde comme la cause, ou comme l’instrument, ou comme l’occasion de nos différentes perceptions ; comme cause, elle ne peut produire nos idées, cela est évident ; elle ne le peut pas non plus en tant qu’instrument, Dieu n’en a pas sans doute besoin. D’ailleurs, puisque Dieu peut par lui-même, sans l’intervention des corps, exciter en nous différentes impressions, il est tout naturel de croire que Dieu n’a point créé un monde matériel ; la raison nous apprenant que Dieu, conformément aux vues de sa sagesse, agit toujours par les voies les plus simples. Elle n’est point aussi l’occasion dont Dieu se sert pour nous donner une certaine suite d’idées ; sa sagesse bien mieux que la matière peut ici le diriger.

La partie la plus estimable du livre en question, est celle où l’auteur lutte contre les difficultés qui naissent de son système. Plus hardi que le P. Malebranche, qui fut du moins arrêté par l’autorité de la révélation, il prétend le concilier avec elle et faire voir que c’est se conformer aux vues de Moïse que de considérer l’univers entier comme une vaste scène d’illusions. Le sophisme dans lequel s’enveloppe perpétuellement l’auteur, consiste en ce qu’il tient l’existence de la matière, parce qu’il n’en connaît ni la nature ni les propriétés, à peu près comme ces pyrrhoniens qui doutaient de tout parce qu’ils rencontraient partout des difficultés, comme si ne pas connaître le fond des choses était une raison pour en nier la réalité. On dit que l’abbé de Condillac, si connu par sa sagacité à manier ce qu’il y a de plus subtil et de plus délit dans la métaphysique, travaillait à réfuter cet ouvrage. Quand son livre paraîtra, je vous en rendrai compte.
ABBE RAYNAL'S REVIEW

Au reste, l'ouvrage dont je viens de donner l'idée est fait avec beaucoup d'adresse. Un des interlocuteurs amène l'autre dans son sentiment à la manière de Socrate. Le fil des idées n'est jamais interrompu par ces écarts qu'on trouve trop souvent dans les livres anglais. Peut-être n'avons-nous pas de livre abstrait plus clair que celui-là.  

There is no paradox, however strange it may be, to which the mind could not give an air of plausibility. One can see this in the newly translated system of Dr. Berkeley. This system, as absurd as it is, finds in a heap of sophisms, some more seductive than others, enough to astound the proudest of minds. The book is divided into three dialogues, in the first one applies one's mind to divest matter of all its sensible qualities; in the second to prove the impossibility of its existence; in the third to answer the objections one may form against that system. The author begins by stripping from matter the sensible qualities that the common herd attributes to it, such as cold, heat, odours, etc. His main reason being that all these qualities are agreeable or form against that system. The author begins by stripping from matter the painful sensations that cannot be found in a substance devoid of perception. He then passes on to primary qualities, with which philosophers enrich bodies, which are extension, figure, solidity, etc.; and proves that these are no more inherent in matter than the others. "If they were not, the author claims, they would have to be fixed and invariable like matter. However, since these things vary according to the diversity of our organs and the viewpoint from which we perceive them, it is a proof that they are in ourselves and not in matter. If matter is devoid of all sensible qualities, what else can it be but a chimerical substance?". If you were to say that matter is the substratum, the support of sensible qualities, as one may speak in the schools, the author would then attack you in this last redoubt with great ease, since he would prove that this substratum must be lying under the qualities that it supports, therefore it must be inferred. But, how could that which is different from extension be its support? To prove the impossibility of matter, the author revives all the obstacles raised by ancient sceptics against movement, extension, infinite divisibility of matter; even if matter were possible, it is deemed by him not worthy of being part of God's scheme. Because either we consider it as the cause, or as the instrument or as the occasion of our various impressions; as cause it cannot, obviously, produce our ideas; it cannot do it either as instrument, God does not really need it. Besides, since God can of himself, without the intervention of bodies, provoke within us various impressions, it is natural to think that God had not at all created a material world; reason telling us that God, in conformity with his wisdom, always takes the simplest path. Neither is it the occasion for God to provide us with a certain sequence of ideas; his wisdom is much better in this respect than matter.

SEBASTIEN CHARLES

The most valuable part of the book is that where the author faces the difficulties raised by his system. Bolder than Malebranche, who bowed in the end to the authority of revelation, he pretends to be able to reconcile his system with the latter and to be able to show that to see the whole universe as a theater of illusions is to think in conformity with Moses. The sophism in which the author perpetually swathes himself consists in denying the existence of matter merely because he knows neither its nature nor its properties, a little bit like the pyrrhonists who doubted everything because they found difficulties everywhere, as if not getting to the bottom of things was a reason to deny their reality. It is said that the abbot of Condillac, so well known for his subtle and delicate wisdom in metaphysical matters, is working on a refutation of that book. When it will appear, I shall review it for you.  

Be that as it may, the book that I presented to you is skillfully crafted. One interlocutor brings the other to share his opinion in the manner of Socrates. The flow of ideas is never interrupted by those asides that one finds all too often in English books. Perhaps there is no abstract book which is clearer than this one.

This report, sent to the Court of Saxe-Gotha in 1750 retains all its importance today. Indeed, it allows one to see how difficult it was for Berkeley, in an era hostile to metaphysical and religious questions, to make himself understood properly. While he tried to criticize abstraction, looking for help on the side of common sense, he was nevertheless catalogued as one of those system builders absorbed in ontological chimeras, whose influence can only be more harmful than beneficial.

Moreover, this text, written early in 1750 (as a matter of fact before the 18th of May) leads one to believe that the review in Mercure de France, dated January 1750, could also have been written by Raynal, who was to take charge of editorial matters only a few months later. Although I am ultimately inclined to believe, for stylistic and argumentative reasons, that it was written by Diderot, Raynal's authorship remains a definite possibility. This is why one ought not to neglect the fact that this text shows once more how difficult it was for Berkeley to find an audience on the other side of the Channel. The author of the review in Mercure de France had already understood that, as he could not bring himself to believe that Berkeley could succeed in finding "a large number of supporters to the cause of Immaterialism". Whether this last sentence was written by Raynal or Diderot or by some unknown author is in the end of little importance since the opinion it expresses is the only thing about Berkeley on which all philosophers of Enlightenment agree.
ABBE RAYNAL'S REVIEW

This translation is usually assumed to be the first one in French. In his inventory of Berkeley's manuscript, Jessop mentions an earlier edition of the translation, dating from 1745, a copy of which he could not find (A Bibliography of George Berkeley, sec. ed., The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, p. 16). For my part, I would like to point out that the article "Gua de Malves" in the Bibliographie ancienne et moderne (Paris, Michaud, 1817, vol. 18, p. 576) also mentions an earlier edition, from 1744, whose existence is, as far as I know, as hypothetical as that of the one mentioned by Jessop.


3 On this part of Raynal's life, see Anatole Feugère, Un précurseur de la Révolution: l'abbé Raynal (1713-1796), Angoulême, Éditions sociales, 1922 and André Cazes, Grimm et les Encyclopédistes, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1933, chapter 2.


5 This is, of course, Gua de Malves' translation: Dialogues entre Hylas et Philonous contre les sceptiques et les athées. Traduit de l'anglais par l'abbé Gua de Malves. Amsterdam (Paris), 1750.

6 It was common during the Enlightenment to link Berkeley with the sceptics.

7 Bringing together Berkeley and Malebranche was also common, especially after the in the Mémoires de Trévoux, in May 1713, where Berkeley was described as a "Malebranchiste de bonne foi".

8 Pyrrhonism and scepticism were conflated during the eighteenth century. Diderot, in the article "Pyrrhonienne" of the Encyclopédie (1766), explicitly links the two.

9 Raynal most probably read beforehand the Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See (1749) which said: "Those philosophers, madam, are termed idealists who, conscious only of their own existence and of a succession of external sensations, do not admit anything else; an extravagant system which should to my thinking have been offspring of blindness itself; and yet, to the disgrace of the human mind and philosophy, it is the most difficult to combat, though the most absurd. It is set forth with equal candour and lucidity by Doctor Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, in three dialogues. It were to be wished that the author of the Essay on the Origins of Human Knowledge [Condillac] would take this work into examination" (M. Jourgain, Diderot's Early Philosophical Works, 2nd ed., New York, Burt Franglin, 1972, p. 104).

10 Mercure de France, January 1750, p. 164.

11 This paper is part of the research for my doctoral dissertation, 'La figure de Berkeley dans la pensée des Lumières'. I would like to thank Sandra Lapointe and Mathieu Marion for their help in translating it into English and David Raynor for his helpful comments.

YALE COLLEGE AND THE ACQUISITION OF WHITEHALL

By J.V. Luce

Trinity College Dublin

While on a visit to Newhaven in April 1996, I took the opportunity to visit Yale's splendid Beineke Library, and was able to call up from the catalogue some interesting documents relating to Bishop Berkeley. Among them was a facsimile copy of the Minutes of a Meeting of the Trustees of the College, dated Dec. 20, 1732, recording business arising from the transfer of Berkeley's property at Whitehall to the College. I offer the following transcription of its contents:

Document

Att, a meeting of the Trustees of Yale College at the Rector's House at New Haven Decr 20, 1732.

Then present the Revd. Messrs

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Then present the Revd. Messrs

Then present the Revd. Messrs

Then present the Revd. Messrs

Then present the Revd. Messrs

The Revd. Mr. Samuel Whittemse was chosen a Trustee of Yale College.

That the Rector be desired to apply to Mr. John Reed for such a Draught to be laid before the Assembly of this Colony ye next May for such a Change of Names from Rector and Trustees to such as are known in Law and by which Donations to it may be better holden.

That ye Revd. Mr. Jared Eliot be hereby desired to go to New Port on Rhodes Island and impowered ye Trustees of Yale College to put ye Indenture of Dr. George Berkeley granting to them his Living in said Island on certain Provisoes, on the publick Record there, to take possession of the Farm Given and let it out according to his best Discretion.

That ye Revd Rector be desired in a letter to return ye Thanks of ye Trustees to the Revd George Berkeley for his generous Donation to them of his farm at New Port on Rhodes Island.

That this Meeting be adjourned to Hartford ye day following the next General Election of this Colony to address ye Assembly in a Body respecting some
Alteration to be made in the Names whereby they are known in the Charter granted and such other Business as may then appear necessary.

These Notes were passed as *firstly left* Sam Whitman Scribe1

Discussion

The Indenture mentioned in the third paragraph may well be the Indenture headed 'Conveyance: Berkeley to Yale College', dated July 26, 1732, and preserved in the Town Records of Newport, Rhode Island. This document is printed in full as Appendix (b) in my father's Life of George Berkeley (1949). When I read it through I at once realised that it could throw light on the business discussed by the Trustees. Indeed it seems that all the items minuted (except the first) relate in one way or another to the acquisition of the Whitehall property.

In the Indenture the contracting parties are named as 'George Berkeley Doctor of Divinity...of the one part, and the president and Fellows of Yale College...of the other part'. It seems clear that the discrepancy between Berkeley's phrasing and their own title of 'Rector and Trustees' was causing some concern. It looks as though the Trustees had been advised of, or were anticipating, possible legal difficulties in regard to the transfer of the property. This would account for their request to John Reed for the preparation of a 'Draught' (para 2), and for their final resolution to address the Hartford Assembly about an alteration in the names of their Charter (para. 5).

The difficulty, one of form rather than substance, could account for the delay of some five to six months which occurred between the signing of the Indenture on July 26, 1732, and the effective transfer of the property to its new ownership, which, as the Minutes show, could not have taken place before the end of December 1732, or the beginning of January 1733.

Berkeley was not in a position to re-negotiate the arrangements in person with the Trustees as he left for England early in August 1732. But we know that he continued to be involved in the legalities of the situation, for he signed and sealed a second instrument of conveyance, dated 17 August 1733. As noted by Luce (Life p.238, n.1), a transcription of this second deed is printed in Fraser (Life & Letters p.192 ff).

Luce states that the phrasing in both deeds is largely identical, but that the second deed contains a more precise description of Yale corporation, and that it gives the name of the president, Elisha Williams (Life p.146), the same Williams who appears as 'Moderator' (Chairman?) in the attendance list above.

Berkeley also took the opportunity to make two changes in the provisions under which his 'generous Donation' was made. These provisions could be the 'certain Provisoes' referred to in para. 3 of the Minutes. In the first deed it was stipulated that the yearly rent and profit of Whitehall should be used to provide maintenance grants for two students of Yale. Yale at the time was a poorly endowed foundation with less than fifty students, so Berkeley's gift of Whitehall with its good house and 96 acres was a major benefaction. Berkeley laid down that two students should be chosen by the president of Yale and the senior episcopal missionary of the Colony on the basis of their performance in an examination. They were to be tested for 2 hours in the morning in Greek and 2 hours in the afternoon in Latin. The grant was to be applied 'during the time between their first and second degree', and they were required to be in residence for 'at least three quarters of each year'. Berkeley even laid down that the election should take place 'on the sixth day of May'.

The reason, I think, for this rather odd provision becomes clear when one looks at the two changes in the second deed. The number of students in receipt of the grant was raised from two to three, and Berkeley stipulates that the title 'scholars of the house' is to be bestowed on them. There could be no clearer indication that Berkeley wanted his New World benefaction to duplicate the hallowed institution of Foundation Scholarship in Trinity College Dublin, where 'scholars of the house' have been elected since the foundation of the College in 1592, Berkeley himself being one of their number.

In Berkeley's time, and indeed until quite recently, the election took place on the Monday after Trinity Sunday. Depending on the date of Easter, this would fall in May or early June. I have checked the date of Berkeley's own election as a 'scholar of the house': it was June 1, 1702! So it seems that he chose for the Yale election a date in close conformity with the custom of his own College and University. This custom is still maintained, for 'Trinity Monday' in TCD now means the Monday in 'Trinity Week', and the College Calendar ensures that it and the annual elections to scholarship and fellowship always fall in May.

In 1900 'the Society of Colonial Dames of Rhode Island purchased from Yale university a long lease of Whitehall with half an acre of land around it, and began to preserve it as a public memorial of Berkeley's visit and mission' (Luce, Life p.147). The Dames continue to maintain and supervise the property with all the care and attention due to its historic associations. I can personally confirm this, for my wife and I had the pleasure of being shown around and entertained there on my 1996 visit by Mrs. Mary M. Stailey and Dr. Maureen Lapan. Visiting scholars can and do reside there in the summer, and the atmosphere must be extremely conducive to Berkeleian research. The
walls are decorated with a rich assortment of Berkeleyian memorabilia including the deeds under which the farm and house were originally acquired by Berkeley. When I saw this I decided it would be a nice idea to present a replica of the Yale Minutes discussed in this article. I am happy to report that this has now been done, and the framed facsimile will hang in its appropriate place with the rest of the documents relating to Berkeley's Whitehall.

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**Berkeley Summer School**

The First Annual Berkeley Summer School took place in Cloyne, Co. Cork, from Thursday 3rd to Sunday 6th September 1998. The organiser was Ms. Geraldine O'Brien, owner of Barnabrow Guesthouse and Mon Quad Restaurant, situated about two miles outside the village, who conceived of the school as a fitting tribute to Berkeley's associations with the area.

The buildings at Barnabrow House date from the seventeenth century and have been beautifully renovated. One of the downstairs rooms was large enough to hold the forty or so participants of the school during the lectures. It was officially opened by Ms. Maureen Gaffney of the Dept. of Psychology TCD (who was born nearby) at an event in Cloyne Cathedral on Thursday evening. She spoke on the theme of place and linked this to Berkeley's affection for his see. This was followed by a splendid banquet sponsored by the International Berkeley Society, where participants exercised their gustatory powers in anticipation of the following day's reflections.

Dr. Paul O'Grady of the Philosophy Dept. TCD gave the first lecture, presenting Berkeley's rationale for his idealism and how it related to the scientific thinking of his time. This was followed by an illustrated lecture by Dr. Maureen O’Grady Library, who argued persuasively that Berkeley had prefigured the pluralists of the 1970s and years before his great publications. A lively discussion ensued, followed by a farewell dinner. On Friday night a concert was given in St. Colman’s Cathedral of music which was contemporaneous with Berkeley’s time there. During the afternoon a local antiquarian, Padraig O’Loneigh, conducted a guided tour of the antiquities of Cloyne.

Saturday morning saw two lectures, starting with an account of Berkeley’s reaction to Cartesian skepticism by Dr. Ian Tipon of the University of Wales at Swansea, President of the International Berkeley Society. This was followed by a personal reflection on the influence of Berkeley on his own thought by Professor Ray Houghton, recently retired from the Dept. of Education TCD. Both of these occasions were lively and sometimes lengthy responses from the floor, despite the best efforts of the chair. A most entertaining talk was given by Mr. Nicholas Loughhan, a local antique dealer, on what he believed was the neglect of ordinary social life in the historiography of the period.

The enjoyment of local hostleries on Saturday night and the witnessing of Irish dancing at close quarters in confined spaces didn’t deter the participants from being present on Sunday morning for two fine papers. The first was given by Dr. Patrick Kelly of the Modern History Dept. TCD, explaining Berkeley’s views on economics. It was a model of urban scholarship. Dr. Maureen Lapan, of Rhode Island College gave an illustrated lecture on Berkeley’s relationship to Newport, Rhode Island, which was most appropriate since Joanne and Richard Dunlap who administer “Whitehall”, Berkeley’s American home, had travelled specially to Cloyne for the summer school. The school closed with a service in Cloyne Cathedral and participants returned to their respective parts of Ireland, the UK and America, hoping that next year will see a repeat of both the intellectual and gastronomic pleasures of this year’s event.

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