

THE RELATION BETWEEN ANTI-ABSTRACTIONISM AND IDEALISM IN BERKELEY'S METAPHYSICS¹

Samuel C. Rickless

[To appear in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*]

1. Introduction

George Berkeley is justly famous for having denied the existence of abstract ideas and for having embraced the idealist thesis that physical objects and their qualities are mind-dependent. As is well known, Berkeley prefaces his first defense of idealism (in the *Principles*) with an introduction that amounts to one long attack on the doctrine of abstraction. This fact immediately raises the question whether Berkeley uses anti-abstractionism as a premise in his argument for idealism.

A number of Berkeley scholars (including George S. Pappas, Margaret Atherton, and Martha Brandt Bolton: call them the “Nominalists”) have argued for an affirmative answer to this question. As they see it, the fact that Berkeley *begins* his case for idealism with a criticism of abstractionism strongly suggests that he means to argue from the denial of abstractionism to idealism. Their case for this Nominalist interpretation rests not only on the relative placement of Berkeley's discussion of abstraction and idealism, but also on individual passages of the *Principles* in which Berkeley appears to suggest that the case for idealism depends on the case against abstractionism.

Other scholars have, in different ways, challenged this interpretation. My purpose here is to set the record straight on the logical relation between anti-abstractionism and idealism in Berkeley's metaphysics.

2. The Nominalist Interpretation

Having spent the Introduction to the *Principles* arguing that abstract ideas are impossible and that appeal to abstract ideas is not needed to explain the possibility of general signification, communication, or universal knowledge, Berkeley turns to the question of whether sensible objects (such as houses, mountains, and rivers) are mind-dependent or mind-independent, whether they are collections of ideas or objects external to the mind that can exist unperceived. In section 4, he argues for idealism, the claim that sensible objects are nothing but ideas or collections thereof:

For what are [houses, mountains, and rivers] but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived? [W2, 42]²

Then, in section 5, Berkeley writes:

If we thoroughly examine this tenet [i.e., that sensible objects can exist unperceived], 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? [W2, 42]

Later, in section 11, Berkeley makes a similar point:

Thus we see how much the tenet of extended, moveable substances existing without the mind, depends on that strange doctrine of *abstract ideas*.

[W2, 45-46]

A number of scholars have been moved by these passages to suggest that Berkeley means to argue from the falsity of the doctrine of abstraction to the truth of idealism. For example, George S. Pappas (1985, 282-283) claims that the second sentence of the section 5 passage asserts:

(P1) To conceive a sensible object existing unperceived *is* to conceive an abstract general idea.

But (P1) entails (P2):

(P2) One can conceive of a sensible object existing unperceived only if one can conceive of an abstract general idea (of the right sort).

And (P2) entails (P3):

(P3) One can conceive of a sensible object existing unperceived only if there are abstract general ideas.

Using (P3) as a premise, Pappas then constructs the following argument for idealism on Berkeley's behalf:

(P3) One can conceive of a sensible object existing unperceived only if there are abstract general ideas.

(P4) If one cannot conceive of a sensible object existing unperceived, then sensible objects cannot exist unperceived.³

(P5) There are no abstract general ideas. [Falsity of the Doctrine of Abstraction]

So, (C) Sensible objects cannot exist unperceived. [Idealism]

Now I agree with Pappas that Berkeley accepts (P4) and (P5). But, *contra* Pappas, I deny that the second sentence of section 5 encapsulates (P1), or, for that matter, any claim that entails (P3). In that sentence, Berkeley suggests that, if the doctrine of abstraction were true, then one might be able to “distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, *so as to* conceive them existing unperceived.” That is to say, if the doctrine of abstraction were true (and one could, in particular, abstract the idea of existence from the idea of being perceived), then one could conceive of sensible objects existing unperceived. But this is the *converse* of (P3), not (P3) itself. And if (P3) is replaced by its converse in Pappas's reconstruction, then the reconstructed argument is straightforwardly invalid. Assuming that Berkeley did not intend to provide a straightforwardly invalid argument for idealism, I conclude that section 5 provides us

with no reason to suppose that Berkeley's argument for idealism runs through his rejection of the doctrine of abstraction.

It might be argued in response that the two sentences from Section 5 say, not merely that the truth of the doctrine of abstraction is *sufficient*, but also that the truth of the doctrine is *necessary*, for the ability to conceive sensible objects existing unperceived. For the claim that tenet T *depends on* doctrine D suggests that the falsity of D entails the falsity of T, and hence that the truth of T *requires* the truth of D. If this were so, then P3 would be true and Pappas's reconstruction would fit the text. But this is not the only way, and indeed in the relevant context it is not the best way, to understand the claim that T depends on D. At the beginning of Section 4, Berkeley notices that the opinion (in this case, tenet T) that sensible objects *can* exist unperceived is "strangely prevailing amongst men". Having argued in the rest of Section 4 that T is false, Berkeley employs Section 5, *not to provide yet another argument for the falsity of T* (for, after all, he does not need such an argument), but rather to explain why belief in T is so widespread, and, importantly, why it is so entrenched. The reason it is so entrenched is that it depends on (that is, it is grounded in and supported by) the doctrine of abstraction (in this case, D). It is *because* of a commitment to D that belief in T is so prevalent amongst men. In the second sentence of Section 5, Berkeley points out that acceptance of D makes it reasonable to suppose that it is possible to mentally separate the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, and thereby makes it reasonable to suppose (on the basis of the assumption that conceivability entails possibility) that it is possible for sensible objects to exist without being perceived. *This* is the function of the "so as" clause in the second sentence of the passage. On balance, it makes far better sense of the

passage to read Berkeley as providing an explanation for the prevalence of T based on the widespread and entrenched belief in D than as providing a supplementary and otiose argument for the falsity of T based on the falsity of D.⁴

Convinced that Berkeley's opposition to abstract ideas is more important than is commonly thought, Margaret Atherton (1987) has tried to explain how his "central principle, that the being of a sensible thing lies in its being perceived, . . . depends on anti-abstractionism" (46). On her picture, Berkeley claims that abstract ideas are inconceivable. Abstraction, as Atherton thinks Berkeley understands it, is either the mental separation of one quality from another or the mental separation of one quality from its sensory determinates. We will return to the two-fold nature of abstraction later. But for Atherton's purposes all that really matters is that abstraction involves the mental removal (the "peeling off," as she puts it) of one quality from another. As she reads him, Berkeley claims that, e.g., extension can't be abstracted from color, because (i) an abstract idea of extension would be an idea of colorless extension, and (ii) the impossibility of conceiving such an idea follows directly from the fact that "the way to take up visual space is by being colored" (50). Similarly (and this is the claim that is crucial for Atherton's reconstruction of Berkeley's argument for idealism), the existence of sensible qualities can't be abstracted from their being perceived, because (i) an abstract idea of a sensible quality would be an idea of an unperceived quality, and (ii) the impossibility of conceiving such an idea follows directly from the fact that "sensible qualities occur only as determinants of perception or as ways of being perceived" (51). Atherton summarizes her point thus:

When Berkeley says that sensible qualities can't exist unperceived, this is a special case of [his claim] that it is impossible to conceive separately what isn't experienced in separation. (51)

Now I think this way of putting the point is a little unfortunate. Robert McKim (1997-98, 6), for one, rightly points out that although he has never had the experience of finding the roof of his house detached from the rest of the house, he can easily conceive of that occurrence. Thus it can't be that Berkeley derives idealism from the claim that it is *impossible* to conceive separately what *isn't* experienced in separation, because, even for Berkeley, it is in fact *possible* to conceive separately what *isn't* experienced in separation. But I take it that Atherton's point goes a little deeper. What she should emphasize is, first, that thanks to the fact that inconceivability entails impossibility, the conclusion that sensible qualities can't exist unperceived follows from the impossibility of conceiving an idea of a sensible quality abstracted from its being perceived, and second, that the impossibility of conceiving an idea of a sensible quality abstracted from its being perceived follows from the fact that the way for a sensible quality to be is by being perceived.

But even if Atherton's reconstruction can avoid McKim's criticism, it still faces the following problem. Atherton supposes that Berkeley takes idealism (that is, the claim that sensible things, including sensible qualities, cannot exist unperceived) to follow from the impossibility of conceiving an idea of a sensible quality abstracted from its being perceived. But she takes Berkeley to infer the impossibility of conceiving this abstract idea from the claim that the way for a sensible quality to be is by being perceived. This is

perilously close to a circular argument. It seems, at the very least, that there is no more reason for an opponent of idealism to accept that the way for a sensible quality to be is by being perceived than there already is to accept the claim that sensible qualities cannot exist unperceived. Moreover, if Atherton's reconstruction is accurate, the logic of the situation would allow Berkeley to argue for idealism directly from the claim that the way for a sensible quality to be is by being perceived: for it seems self-evident that if the way for a sensible quality to be is to be perceived, then sensible qualities can't exist unperceived. Appeal to the impossibility of abstraction would amount to an unnecessary detour in the road to idealism.

Martha Brandt Bolton (1987) comes closer to identifying the way in which Berkeley uses anti-abstractionism to argue for idealism. As she argues, the proposition that abstract ideas are impossible functions as a premise in Berkeley's argument from the claim that secondary qualities are mind-dependent to the conclusion that primary qualities are mind-dependent. The argument appears at *Principles* 10:

But I desire any one to reflect, and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body, without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moved, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where therefore the other sensible qualities are, there must these be also, to wit, in the mind and no where else. [W2, 45]

Similar reasoning appears in the *First Dialogue*, where Philonous (Berkeley's spokesman) argues as follows:⁵

[One cannot] frame the idea of any figure, abstracted from all particularities of size, or even from other sensible qualities. [And it is not] possible, that should really exist in Nature, which implies a repugnancy in its conception. Since therefore it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities, [it follows,] that where the one exist, there necessarily the other exist likewise. Consequently the very same arguments which [are] admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities, are without any farther application of force against the primary too.

The structure of the reasoning is clear. Berkeley assumes that secondary qualities are in the mind and then infers from the inseparability of primary and secondary qualities that primary qualities are in the mind. But Berkeley does not take the inseparability-in-reality of primary and secondary qualities for granted: he infers this from the *mental* inseparability of these properties (i.e., from the impossibility of forming abstract ideas of these properties), presumably on the grounds that what can't be *conceived* apart can't *exist* apart in reality (a principle that follows directly from the more general claim that inconceivability entails impossibility).

Where Bolton goes wrong, I think, is in her account of what grounds Berkeley's opposition to the doctrine of abstraction. As she recognizes, some have argued that Berkeley's reason for rejecting the mental inseparability of sensible qualities is that these

qualities cannot actually exist in separation.⁶ Here, for example, is a representative passage from the first draft of the Introduction to the *Principles* (see also *Alciphron* 7, 333-334):

It is, I think, a receiv'd axiom that an impossibility cannot be conceiv'd. For what created intelligence will pretend to conceive, that which God cannot cause to be? Now it is on all hands agreed, that nothing abstract or general can be made really to exist, whence it should seem to follow, that it cannot have so much as an ideal existence in the understanding. [W2, 125]⁷

But if Berkeley's reason for rejecting the mental separability of two qualities is that these qualities cannot exist in separation, then he would be arguing in a circle if he turned around and insisted that primary and secondary qualities cannot exist in separation on the grounds that they can't be conceived apart. To help Berkeley out of this mess, Bolton suggests that the real reason for Berkeley's anti-abstractionism depends on his "theory of idea-objects," according to which (as she argues) "an idea is its own object; if there is an idea of x, then x itself is that idea" (68). She writes:

Berkeley...uses the expression 'idea of', but whereas other idea theorists mean by it 'idea that represents', he typically means 'idea, namely'. When Berkeley writes that someone who perceives something triangular has an idea *of* a triangle, he means the person perceives an idea that *is* a triangle. (68)

The nice thing about this theory is that anti-abstractionism falls out of it. As Bolton argues:

An abstract idea is its own object and thus has all the properties its object does; but it must also lack some of these properties, because it is supposed to omit some properties of its object(s). Thus all abstract ideas are logically impossible. (70)

However, as both Robert McKim (1997-98, 10-11) and Robert Muehlmann (1992, 53-54) point out, anyone who takes this sort of theory of idea-objects for granted is in no better dialectical position than someone who takes idealism itself for granted. For consider a situation in which I am looking at, and so have an idea of, a table T. It is a direct consequence of the claim that my idea of T is identical to T that T is itself an idea. Surely this is too easy of an argument for idealism: the claim that ideas are their own objects requires as much defense as the claim that all sensible objects are mind-dependent. Yet on Bolton's view, Berkeley's theory of idea-objects is, as she puts it, "fundamental" (68), that is to say, axiomatic.

So far, I have considered three different ways of arguing, on Berkeley's behalf, from anti-abstractionism to idealism, and I have found each proposal wanting. It does not follow from this, however, that there are no *other* lines of reasoning that take Berkeley from the one tenet to the other. Indeed, it might be suggested that there is a rather simple way of arguing for idealism from an anti-abstractionism grounded in a claim about *meaning*. In *Principles* 3, Berkeley writes that an intuitive knowledge of the fact that sensible objects cannot exist unperceived "may be obtained...by anyone that shall attend

to what is meant by the term ‘exist’ when applied to sensible things.” The thought here, as Berkeley puts it, is that *to say* that the table I write on exists *is to say* that I or some other mind perceives it, and *to say* that a such-and-such a mind exists *is to say* that it perceives. Perhaps, then, Berkeley’s point is that we have no idea of existence apart from perceiving and being perceived. And if this were true, then it would follow directly that sensible objects cannot exist unperceived.

Now I do not deny that Berkeley uses *Principles* 3 to argue for idealism from a claim about the *meaning* of “exists”. But I *do* deny that this amounts to an argument for idealism that is based on the falsity of the doctrine of abstraction. The relevant meaning-claim here (call it “M”) is that “exists”, as applied to any sensible object, means “is perceived”. From M two things follow: (i) that it is impossible to mentally separate the idea of existence of a sensible object from the idea of its being perceived, and (ii) that sensible objects cannot exist unperceived. M entails (i) inasmuch as M entails that the idea of a sensible object’s existence is *numerically identical to* the idea of its being perceived, and hence, given that no idea can be mentally separated from itself, the idea of a sensible object’s existence cannot be mentally separated from the idea of its being perceived. M entails (ii) inasmuch as M entails that the proposition that such-and-such a sensible object O exists is numerically identical to the proposition that O is being perceived, and hence that it would be self-contradictory to say that O exists unperceived. But from the fact that M entails both (i) and (ii), it does not follow that (i) entails (ii). And thus it cannot be argued on this basis that Berkeley is committed to the claim that (ii) follows from (i). The argument of *Principles* 3 is an argument from a claim about meaning to the falsity of the doctrine of abstraction (i.e., (i)) and to the impossibility of

sensible objects' existing unperceived (i.e., (ii)): importantly, it is not an argument from (i) to (ii).

3. The Real Relation Between Berkeley's Anti-Abstractionism and Idealism

As I read Berkeley, the dialectical situation is more complicated than Nominalists acknowledge. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, as is widely known (but insufficiently emphasized in the context of this debate), Berkeley distinguishes between two kinds of abstraction in the Introduction to the *Principles*: there is, first, the mental separation (or abstraction) of one particular quality from another (call this, following Bolton (1987, 64), "singling" abstraction), and second, the mental separation (or abstraction) of a general quality from its particular determinations (call this, following Winkler (1989, 29), "generalizing" abstraction).⁸ The importance of this distinction (as I will argue) lies in the fact that Berkeley rests his case for idealism, not on his denial of the possibility of *generalizing* abstraction, but rather on his denial of the possibility of *singling* abstraction. In the second place, Berkeley's case for idealism does not rest on a blanket rejection of *all* forms of *singling* abstraction. Rather, the fundamental anti-abstractionist assumption, for his purposes, is the claim that primary qualities cannot be mentally "singled out" from secondary qualities. Crucially, the claim that the existence of sensible objects can't be mentally "singled out" from their being perceived is not a *premise* in, but rather a *consequence* of, Berkeley's argument for idealism.

Let's begin by taking a closer look at the passages in which Berkeley distinguishes between singling and generalizing abstraction. Singling abstraction is the subject of section 7 of the Introduction to the *Principles*:

We are told, the mind being able to consider each quality singly, or abstracted from those other qualities with which it is united, does by that means frame to it self abstract ideas. For example, there is perceived by sight an object extended, coloured, and moved: this mixed or compound idea the mind resolving into its simple, constituent parts, and viewing each by it self, exclusive of the rest, does frame the abstract ideas of extension, colour, and motion. [W2, 27-28]

As Berkeley emphasizes, although we experience qualities as blended together (so that, for example, a table's rectangular shape, felt degree of hardness, and particular shade of brown are experienced as a whole, rather than experienced individually), abstractionists believe that ideas of these qualities can be separated by the mind even if the qualities themselves cannot exist apart in reality. Singling abstraction, then, can (though it need not) involve the mental separation of particular qualities: according to abstractionists, just as it is possible to abstract color from extension, so it is possible to abstract this very particular shade of brownness from this very particular rectangular shape.

Generalizing abstraction is the subject of the next two sections of the Introduction. In section 8, we find the following description of the process of abstraction:

The mind having observed that in the particular extensions perceived by sense, there is something common and alike in all, and some other things peculiar, as this or that figure or magnitude, which distinguish them one from another; it considers apart or singles out by it self that which is common, making thereof a

most abstract idea of extension, which is neither line, surface, nor solid, nor has any figure or magnitude but is an idea entirely prescinded from all these. So likewise the mind by leaving out of the particular colours perceived by sense, that which distinguishes them one from another, and retaining that only which is common to all, makes an idea of colour in abstract which is neither red, nor blue, nor white, nor any other determinate colour.⁹ [W2, 28]

Thus, I might perceive a baseball, a basketball, and a soccer ball, consider the circular shape they share, mentally separating it from the particular ways in which they manifest circularity, and thereby construct an abstract idea of roundness. Or I might perceive a tomato, a Toreador's cape, and a fire engine, consider the color they share, mentally separating it from the particular shades of redness they manifest, and thereby construct an abstract idea of red. In each case, the idea produced by this process of abstraction is taken to be general, rather than particular; an idea of roundness that applies to all round things, no matter the ways in which they differ; an idea of red that applies to all red things, no matter the ways in which *they* differ. So, unlike the process of singling abstraction, the process of generalizing abstraction *necessarily* yields ideas of general signification.

The thesis that Berkeley distinguishes between two purported ways of forming abstract ideas is confirmed by a passage from section 10 of the Introduction in which he attempts to prove that abstract ideas are impossible:

To be plain, I own my self able to abstract in one sense, 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. But I deny that I can abstract one from another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated; or that I can frame a general notion by abstracting from particulars in the manner aforesaid. Which two last are the proper acceptations of *abstraction*. [W2, 29-30]

Here, Berkeley runs two separate arguments, one against ideas formed by singling abstraction, the other against ideas formed by generalizing abstraction. The argument against the former is ably summarized by Winkler (1989, 33):

What an abstract idea purports to represent is impossible. But what is impossible is inconsistent, and what is inconsistent cannot be conceived. It follows that there can be no abstract ideas.

The problem with singling abstraction articulated here is that the use of such a faculty would make it possible to conceive or imagine impossible states of affairs. The crucial premise in this attack on the possibility of singling abstraction, as Winkler rightly emphasizes, is the principle that impossibility entails inconceivability.

Winkler claims that Berkeley's attack on *generalizing* abstraction also rests on this kind of argument. But I think that this is a mistake. The problem with generalizing

abstraction, as Berkeley sees it, is that the mind's powers are simply inadequate to the purported task. For example, Berkeley writes in section 10 of the Introduction:

Whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and colour. Likewise the idea of man that I frame to my self, must be either of a white, or a black, or a tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man. I cannot by any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described.
[W2, 29]

Or consider the following exchange from the *First Dialogue*:

Philonous: Without doubt you can tell, whether you are able to frame this or that idea. Now I am content to put our dispute on this issue. If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes, as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of.

Hylas: To confess ingenuously, I cannot. [W2, 193]

Berkeley's point in these passages is that the mind simply cannot meet the challenge of mentally separating an idea from all its particular determinations. Try as hard as we

might, we simply cannot frame an idea of a red ball that is of no particular shade of red and of no particular size, or an idea of a man that is of no particular height or color.¹⁰

Why does Winkler think that Berkeley bases his opposition to generalizing abstraction on the claim that ideas formed by this putative process would represent impossible things? Berkeley's fundamental assumption, as Winkler sees it, is that all things – i.e., all entities that are capable of independent existence – are particular, and consequently that universals (i.e., non-particular properties that are capable of existing in many different places at the same time) are unable to exist by themselves, i.e., independently of the particulars that exemplify them. But ideas formed by generalizing abstraction are supposed to be ideas of separately existing universals. It then follows directly from the principle that impossibility entails inconceivability that it is impossible to frame ideas *via* generalizing abstraction (see Winkler (1989, 30-31)).

The problem with Winkler's reconstruction here is that there is no reason to suppose that Berkeley assumes that ideas formed by generalizing abstraction would have to be ideas of universals that are capable of existing independently of the particulars that exemplify them. Berkeley assumes no more than that generalizing abstraction purportedly produces ideas of X that are not ideas of any particular X, such as ideas of shape that are not ideas of any particular shape, or ideas of human being that are not ideas of any particular human being. All that generalizing abstraction purportedly accomplishes is the mental separation of an idea from its particular determinations. Importantly, it is not necessary for Berkeley to assume that every idea thereby produced would have to represent a separately existing universal. It is certainly consistent with the process of generalizing abstraction as Berkeley describes it that it should issue in ideas of

universals that cannot exist independently of the particulars that exemplify them. The problem with the purported process of generalizing abstraction, as I say, is that our minds simply cannot undertake it.

Given that Berkeley distinguishes between two kinds of abstract ideas framed by different mental processes, the question of how Berkeley's anti-abstractionism and his idealism are logically related reduces to two separate questions: first, whether Berkeley's argument for idealism depends on his denial of the possibility of "singling" abstraction, and, second, whether the very same argument depends on his denial of the possibility of "generalizing" abstraction.

Let's consider the second question first. As I read him, Berkeley's refusal to countenance ideas formed by generalizing abstraction does not serve as a premise in his argument for the mind-dependence of sensible objects. Rather, Berkeley's numerous references to generalizing abstraction are all in the service of a different claim, namely that belief in the possibility of generalizing abstraction has led many of his predecessors and contemporaries into inextricable philosophical difficulties, both in metaphysics and in ethics. These difficulties include the claim that there are extended substances that are also mind-independent, the incomprehensibility of the idea of time, and problems with the understanding and teaching of morals.

Consider, for example, *Principles* 11:

Again, *great* and *small*, *swift* and *slow*, are allowed to exist no where without the mind, being entirely relative, and changing as the frame or position of the organs of sense varies. The extension therefore which exists without the mind, is neither

great nor small, the motion neither swift nor slow, that is, they are nothing at all. But say you, they are extension in general, and motion in general: thus we see how much the tenet of extended, moveable substances existing without the mind, depends on that strange doctrine of *abstract ideas*. [W2, 45-46]

Berkeley's point here is that commitment to the possibility of framing an idea of extension that is an idea of something with no particular shape or size is what has led his adversaries to believe that there are, or could be, extended substances that are mind-independent. We may suppose (and, as I will argue, we would be right to suppose) that Berkeley takes himself to have independent reasons for thinking that extended substances must be mind-dependent, and hence takes himself to have independent reasons for thinking that acceptance of the doctrine of generalizing abstraction has led his opponents to make a serious *metaphysical* mistake about the nature of extended things.

Or consider *Principles* 97:

Beside the external existence of the objects of perception, another great source of errors and difficulties, with regard to ideal knowledge, is the doctrine of *abstract ideas*, such as it hath been set forth in the Introduction [...] Time, place, and motion, taken in particular or concrete, are what every body knows; but having passed through the hands of a metaphysician, they become too abstract and fine, to be apprehended by men of ordinary sense. Bid your servant meet you at such a *time*, in such a *place*, and he shall never stay to deliberate on the meaning of those words: in conceiving that particular time and place, or the motion by which he is

to get thither, he finds not the least difficulty. But if *time* be taken, exclusive of all those particular actions and ideas that diversify the day, merely for the continuation of existence, or duration in abstract, then it will perhaps gravel even a philosopher to comprehend it. [W2, 83]

The problem here is that the doctrine of generalizing abstraction has led philosophers to suppose that the idea of time (the meaning of the word “time”) is obscure and incomprehensible. But, for Berkeley, there is nothing incomprehensible here. To think of time is to think of a particular temporal duration, and there is nothing incomprehensible about that. Difficulties arise only when one tries to mentally separate the idea of duration from all of its particular determinations, i.e., when one attempts to engage in generalizing abstraction with respect to the idea of time.

So much for the inextricably *metaphysical* difficulties that Berkeley thinks his opponents fall into as a result of their commitment to the possibility of generalizing abstraction. In section 100 of the *Principles*, Berkeley writes of the particularly *ethical* difficulties produced by the same commitment:

What it is for a man to be happy, or an object good, every one may think he knows. But to frame an abstract idea of *happiness*, prescinded from all particular pleasure, or of *goodness*, from every thing that is good, this is what few can pretend to. So likewise, a man may be just and virtuous, without having precise ideas of *justice* and *virtue*. The opinion that those and the like words stand for general notions abstracted from all particular persons and actions, seems to have

rendered morality difficult, and the study thereof of less use to mankind. And in effect, the doctrine of *abstraction* has not a little contributed towards spoiling the most useful parts of knowledge. [W2, 84-85]

Again, Berkeley emphasizes that the doctrine of generalizing abstraction, when applied to ethical ideas, such as justice and goodness, results in ethical difficulties and the spoiling of our ethical knowledge. Given that Berkeley does not provide much in the way of details here, one can only speculate as to *how* generalizing abstraction is supposed to produce these difficulties. Perhaps Berkeley is thinking along the following lines. There are those (is Berkeley thinking of Plato?) who believe that a person must have knowledge of justice, abstracted from all particular just acts and just people, in order to be just. These philosophers then engage in a fruitless search for a definition of the abstract, general idea of justice, even though they have no difficulty identifying particular acts and persons as just (or unjust). If these philosophers were to give up the doctrine of generalizing abstraction, they would focus their attention on teaching moral behavior on the basis of their knowledge of particular instances thereof, a form of ethical practice that is likely to lead to better ethical consequences than exploration of the nature of non-existent abstract ethical ideas.

In sum, whether the relevant subject matter is metaphysical or ethical, Berkeley adverts to the doctrine of generalizing abstraction in the *Principles* merely in order to press the point that acceptance of the doctrine leads to serious philosophical and practical problems. I venture to affirm that at no point in his overall corpus does Berkeley employ

his denial of *this* doctrine as a premise in his argument for the mind-dependence of sensible objects.

As I read him, Berkeley also presses the point that acceptance of the doctrine of *singling* abstraction leads to serious philosophical problems. For example, in section 116 of the *Principles*, Berkeley worries that belief in the ability “to frame an idea of *pure Space exclusive of all body*” is at the root of the false Newtonian doctrine of absolute space [W2, 93]. And in sections 122-123 of the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley complains that belief in the ability to “single out extension from all other tangible and visible qualities” has led to the wrong-headed belief that some ideas of sense “are common to sight and touch” [W1, 220].

But clearly the most important of these problems is the supposition that sensible objects can exist unperceived. On my interpretation, Berkeley argues for idealism on independent grounds, concludes that sensible objects can't exist unperceived, and then infers (based on the principle that impossibility entails inconceivability) that it is impossible in the case of sensible objects to single out the idea of existence in separation from the idea of being perceived. I take this to be the point of the following passage from section 5 of the *Principles*:

Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I might as easily divide a thing from it self. [W2, 42-43]

Berkeley is here telling us that sensible qualities, both primary and secondary, are ideas, i.e., entities that cannot exist unperceived. To suppose it possible for the mind to mentally separate the being of any of these qualities from being perceived would be to suppose it possible for these qualities to exist unperceived. But, given the truth of idealism, it is no more possible for sensible qualities to exist unperceived than it is for a thing to be divided from itself. Berkeley is *not* here arguing from the impossibility of singling abstraction to idealism. Rather, he is arguing that idealism reveals how foolish is the supposition that one might singly abstract the being of a sensible thing from its being perceived.

Notice that this leaves open the possibility that Berkeley elsewhere employs his denial of the doctrine of *singling* abstraction to argue *for* idealism. And, indeed, I think this possibility is actualized. As we saw earlier, Berkeley's argument that primary qualities are ideas rests on the following assumptions: (i) that secondary qualities are ideas, (ii) that ideas of secondary qualities are mentally inseparable from ideas of primary qualities, (iii) that inconceivability entails impossibility, and (iv) that actually inseparable qualities have the same ontological status (i.e., if a certain quality is an idea, then any quality that is actually inseparable from it is also an idea). [Of course, this argument is only as convincing as its first premise. But Berkeley is well aware of this, and it is precisely for this reason that he devotes almost the entirety of the *First Dialogue* to establishing that secondary qualities are no more than sensations, in particular pleasures and pains.] Crucial to the argument that primary qualities are ideas is the assumption that it is impossible to abstract secondary qualities from the primary qualities with which they

are blended in our experience. Were this kind of abstraction to be possible, it would be a form of *singling*, and not a form of *generalizing*, abstraction.¹¹

All of this shows that Berkeley *can't* be thinking that the only (or even, the main) argument against the possibility of singling abstraction is the one Winkler attributes to him, namely the argument that what makes it impossible for the mind to mentally separate sensible qualities is the fact that such qualities cannot be separated in reality. Berkeley doesn't infer the impossibility of mentally separating color from extension from the fact that color can't exist in separation from extension. Rather, he argues in reverse, claiming that color can't exist in separation from extension *precisely because* the idea of color can't be mentally separated from the idea of extension. Having then established that all qualities (and hence all objects) are mind-dependent, Berkeley then argues that the impossibility of separating the existence of a sensible object from its being perceived proves that it is impossible to singly abstract the idea of a sensible object's existence to its being perceived. As should now be clear, there is no circularity in Berkeley's overall argumentative strategy, as long as he does not rely on idealism to establish that primary and secondary qualities are mentally inseparable. And he doesn't: the reason for this is that mere introspection is sufficient in his mind to deliver the result that color can't be conceived in separation from extension, that motion can't be conceived in separation from the body moved, and so on.

4. Conclusion

The upshot of this discussion is that the relation between anti-abstractionism and idealism in Berkeley's metaphysics, though dialectically complex, is ultimately consistent. As

we've seen, there is no quick road from anti-abstractionism to idealism in Berkeley's philosophy. Rather, Berkeley distinguishes between two kinds of abstraction, "singling" and "generalizing" abstraction. His argument against the possibility of generalizing abstraction, and against the possibility of singling out primary qualities from secondary qualities, rests on introspective awareness of the mind's inadequacy to the task. From the fact that primary qualities cannot be mentally separated from secondary qualities and the fact that secondary qualities are hedonic sensations (pleasures and pains), Berkeley infers that primary qualities (and hence, all sensible qualities) are ideas. Given that all sensible objects are either sensible qualities (such as color and shape) or collections of sensible qualities (such as tables and chairs), he concludes that all sensible objects are mind-dependent (i.e., that idealism is true). But the mind-dependence of sensible objects entails that the being of such an object cannot be separated from its being perceived. From this result and the fact that impossibility entails inconceivability, Berkeley then infers that the idea of existence purportedly formed by the process of singling abstraction is a fiction. Importantly, the procedure of appealing to the impossibility of certain kinds of "singling" acts of abstraction to establish a thesis (namely, idealism) that is then used to argue against the possibility of "singling" out an abstract of idea of existence is non-circular.

University of California, San Diego

REFERENCES

- Atherton, M. 'Berkeley's Anti-Abstractionism', in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, edited by E. Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987), 45-60.
- Bolton, M. B. 'Berkeley's Objection to Abstract Ideas and Unconceived Objects', in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, edited by E. Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987), 61-81.
- McKim, R. 'Abstraction and Immaterialism: Recent Interpretations', *The Berkeley Newsletter* (1997-98), No. 15: 1-13.
- Muehlmann, R. G. *Berkeley's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).
- Pappas, G. S. 'Abstract Ideas and the "Esse is Percipi" Thesis', *Hermathena* (1985) No. 139: 47-62. Reprinted in *George Berkeley: Critical Assessments, Volume II*, edited by W. E. Creery (London: Routledge, 1991), 271-85.
- Rickless, S. C. *Berkeley's Argument for Idealism*. [in preparation]
- Winkler, K. P. *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹ I presented ancestors of this article at a meeting of the Southwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at UCSD (February 2007), at a session of the International Berkeley Society at the Eastern Division Meeting of the APA (December 2007), and at an International Berkeley Society conference in Neuchâtel, Switzerland (April 2010). I would like to thank the participants at these meetings for their helpful comments and constructive suggestions, particularly Margaret Atherton, Martha Bolton, Stephen Daniel, Richard Glauser, Marc Hight, James Hill, George Pappas, Ville Paukkonen, Don Rutherford, Katia Saporiti, and Eric Watkins. I am very grateful to John Rogers and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for their assistance in improving the paper. This article would not have reached its present form without the deeply appreciated intellectual and moral support provided by my wife and colleague, Dana K. Nelkin.

² References to Berkeley's works are to *The Works of George Berkeley*, 1948-57, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 volumes. Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons (abbreviated by "W", followed by volume number and page number(s)).

³ From the claim that inconceivability entails impossibility, a claim that Pappas extracts from the Master Argument at *Principles* 22-23.

⁴ An anonymous reviewer suggests that in the first two sentences of Section 5, Berkeley "is saying that any materialist worth his or her salt—any materialist willing to say that he or she can conceive of an unperceived object— is mired in illegitimate abstraction". But Berkeley does not here say, nor is he committed to saying, that those who claim to be

able to conceive sensible objects existing unperceived *must* be committed to the doctrine of abstraction. A materialist worth her salt might simply rest her belief that it is possible to conceive a sensible object's existing unperceived on an exercise of imagination similar to the exercise that Berkeley describes in the passage that has come to be known as the Master Argument. As Hylas, the arch-materialist, says in the first *Dialogue*, "As I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of" [W2, 200]. This perfectly ordinary purported imaginative exercise does not require prior commitment to the doctrine of abstraction.

⁵ I have taken Philonous's interlocutor, Hylas, out of the conversation, for his contributions do not add anything substantial.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of this point, see Kenneth Winkler (1989, 28-35).

⁷ And for a similar point, see *Alciphron* 7 (W3, 333-334).

⁸ Winkler (1989, 29) notes that he is simply following the lead of Thomas Reid here.

⁹ Similarly for motion: "And in like manner by considering motion abstractedly not only from the body moved, but likewise from the figure it describes, and all particular

directions and velocities, the abstract idea of motion is framed; which equally corresponds to all particular motions whatsoever that may be perceived by sense” [W2, 28].

¹⁰ An anonymous reviewer asks whether the passages cited in the text support no more than the proposition that Berkeley claims to be able to introspect a simple failure of conception, rather than an impossibility. The suggestion here is that, by reflecting, Berkeley is noticing no more than that he is at present failing to mentally separate the idea of a sensible object from the idea of its being perceived; he does not infer from this that he (or, for that matter, someone else) is *incapable* of the relevant act of mental separation.

But the text belies this interpretation. In Section 10 of the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley says, not just that he has failed to conceive the idea of a man that is of no particular color and of no particular size; he says that he “cannot by any effort of thought” conceive such an idea. What Berkeley claims to be able to recognize here on the basis of introspection is an *inability* to generate the relevant abstract idea. Similarly, in the first *Dialogue*, Philonous claims not just that Hylas can tell (presumably by introspection) whether he is succeeding or failing, but also whether he is “able to”, frame this or that idea. And Hylas’s reaction to Philonous’s question whether he “can frame” a “distinct abstract idea” is not that he *does* not, but rather than he “cannot”.

Perhaps Berkeley is not entitled to conclude from the fact that he has tried and failed to conceive a certain idea that he cannot in fact conceive it. But there can be no

doubt that Berkeley takes himself to recognize introspectively that, try as he might, it is *impossible* for him to frame the relevant kind of abstract idea.

¹¹ I should note that many scholars read the *First Dialogue* as providing an argument for the ideational status of primary qualities that depends on considerations of perceptual relativity, but does *not* depend on the denial of the possibility of singling abstraction. For reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper, and that have much in common with Muehlmann's (1992) interpretation of the *Dialogues*, I disagree. Further discussion of this may be found in Rickless [in preparation].