AN EXPOSITION OF BERKELEY'S ABSTRACT THEORY

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Abstract

The concept of abstraction as developed by Plato received a well-treated exposition during the era of George Berkeley. In his attempt to distinguish himself from the empiricist theory of John Locke, Berkeley stated that nothing exists without been first formed by the ideas. The existence of all things is a fulfillment of minded conceived ideas and nothing can ever be without first received by the mind through its ideological conception. However, the researcher affirmed the position of George Berkeley stating that all things are as a result of the mind and whatever exist or whatever name given to a thing is based on how such appears to an individual. The concept of abstraction is individualistic as nothing receives a general notion or treatment. Whatever a name given to a thing is as a result of whatever and however such appears to mind. However, nothing exists without been abstracted from the mind as the mind is the foundational block of all things.

Introduction

George Berkeley (1685–1753), Bishop of Cloyne, was perhaps the greatest of the philosophers to derive his main inspiration from the metaphysics of John Locke. He is best known for his idealism, expounded in the Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (1710). In the work, Berkeley contended that idea rules everything. According to him, the world contains nothing but spirits and their 'ideas'. Berkeley thought that this theory was an ineluctable consequence of the empiricist method that Locke had put forward. Since he accepted that method and moreover thought that was the only thing that accorded with human common sense, he accepted the consequence. However, his idealism was consequent upon a clearer, though far narrower, presentation of the concept of an 'idea' than can be derived from Locke. For Berkeley 'ideas' are mental particulars, the immediate objects of the 'perception' whereby the contents of our mind are revealed to us, and they comprise all actual mental contents. Images, sense experiences, thoughts, concepts, all are 'ideas' in Berkeley's sense, since all are immediate objects of mental perception.

In his effort to establish his abstraction theory, Berkeley attacked the empiricist theory of his predecessor. He attacked Locke's theory of abstraction, arguing that since everything that exists is a particular, there can be no such thing as an abstract idea. For consider the abstract idea of a triangle: it is supposed to be neither scalene nor isosceles, to have all triangular shapes and no specific triangular shape at once. And is it not an absurdity to think of a triangle that is indeterminate in all its properties? There is an obvious reply: Locke was referring, not to a triangle, but to the idea of a triangle; it is ridiculous to suppose that an idea of a triangle is itself a triangle and therefore determinate in its shape. But this reply was forbidden by Berkeley's assimilation of ideas and images under a single mental category. An image of a triangle in some sense shares the properties of the triangle it represents. Berkeley is right in assuming therefore that there can no more be an abstract image of a triangle than there can be an abstract triangle. And since images are his model for all the 'ideas' of the mind, his conclusion must therefore appear correspondingly more plausible.

The Concept of Idealism

Idealism as a school of philosophy historically made its presence during the latter half of 19th century. It is traced back to the ancient period of Western Philosophy which Plato was famous known to have thought and worked for it (Omen and Amam 292). However, idealism as a philosophy originated from Plato. It believes that all the things we perceive in this world are nothing other than shadows; things not in their true form, rather, the pure state of all these things exist in the world of ideas (Ezeani 40).

The word idealism is referred to the view that all physical realities must be perceived in order to be. More precisely, it is the view that it is impossible for any physical property to be instanced without being perceived. Idealism implies that for any physical property instance, there must be a

simultaneous existing subject which must be aware of it or is aware of some property upon which it depend (Anyam 19). So, without a conscious subject of experience, there would be nothing physical. According to Obiora, idealism is a metaphysical doctrine that holds that reality is essentially ideas, mind or spirit (26). Everything that exists is the creation of the mind and nothing more. The doubt of the mind is the doubt of existence as the mind is the housing of every creation.

Idealism is sometimes defined in cognitive terms. According to Nicholas Rescher, the philosophical position that reality is somehow mind-correlated or mind-coordinated is that the real objects in the external world are not dependent of the cognizing minds but have an existence correlative to mental operation (Rescher 227). In conflict with the doctrine, Rescher provided contemporary cosmological evidence for believing that there a long period of time prior to the emergence of cognition, evolutionary biology strongly suggests that cognitive operations are not basic but result from long series of non-mental events, and microphysics gives us insight into the realm of things to tiny for the complex operations evidently necessary for cognition.

However, according to Rescher there has been historically a central sense of the word 'idealism' which does not appeal to cognition but to something more basic, that is, "pure conscious experience" (Leibniz 1989a). Furthermore, there is a kind of more conscious experience which at least conceptually can occur without minds. So, claiming that physical reality enquires some kind of awareness or experience does not necessarily mean that physical realities require cognition. The possibility of non-cognitive awareness will be argued showing that contemporary science has not even rendered idealism implausible, much less refuted it.

George Berkeley is perhaps the most important defender of idealism in the history of philosophy. One of his central arguments for idealism began by examining color experience. Berkeley's discussion of the nature of color is given in the form of a dialogue between Hylas (the name is derived from the Greek for 'matter') and Philonous ('lover of mind'). Their debate is framed as a debate about the nature of sensible things, 'those which are immediately perceived by sense.'

Philonous poses the central question:

> Philonous: Doth the reality of sensible things consist in being perceived? or is it something distinct from their being perceived, and that bears no relation to the mind?
>
> Hylas: To exist is one thing, to be perceived another.

The question is whether sensible things, the immediate objects of senses like sight and touch exist independently of being perceived. Philonous, the idealist (and the spokesman for Berkeley's own view) says not, whereas Hylas, the anti-idealist, thinks that the things we sense can exist independently of the mind.

Berkeley's Theory of Abstract Ideas

Berkeley realizes that the power to form abstract ideas has a longstanding place in philosophy. His immediate predecessor, John Locke, makes a great deal of the power of abstraction, and so Berkeley is very often addressing himself against Locke. Nonetheless, it is not Locke that invented abstracted ideas; arguably, abstracts date to ancient Greek philosophy and well before. They are a common philosophical motif. This means that the burden of proof is on Berkeley to show why such a staple of the philosophical diet should be gotten rid of. In other words, how, if it is so false, did abstraction become so accepted? Answering this question gives us Berkeley's argument against abstract ideas themselves.

Now, this claim that the mind cannot form abstract ideas lacks a certain sort of colloquial sense. When I am in class and my teacher wants me to focus on the broader concept at play, she says to me, "think of this in the abstract." Or, I will be in conversation and as a clarification will say that I am speaking abstractly, not just of this or that. The word abstract has a very welcome home in the English language – so, in what manner is Berkeley saying that we do not have the power of abstraction?

Berkeley has a simple way of explaining himself. He has no desire to rid us of the common-sense notion that we can speak generally instead of specifically. His solution to the stated question is simple: general ideas exist; abstract ideas do not (Berkeley 12). Fogelin explains that by this point, it is clear that "Berkeley is thus faced with two tasks: the first, to produce decisive reasons for rejecting the doctrine of abstract ideas, the second, to give a satisfactory account of general terms in place of the abstractionist account" (Fogelin 109). Berkeley's tactic is to prove that abstract ideas do nothing that general ideas do not; and, because (as will be shown) general ideas do not need abstraction to be explained, there is no reason to posit the existence of abstract ideas.

One must distinguish at this point between the colloquial use of the word "abstract" and philosophical use of the same word. Berkeley describes abstraction's philosophical use in some length, and I think it is worthwhile to see the full selection. Here is the passage:

> "It is agreed on all hands, that the qualities or modes of things do never really exist each of them apart by itself and separated from all others, but are mixed, as it were, and blended together, several in the same object. But 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… Not that it is possible for colour or motion to exist without extension, but only that the mind can frame to it self by abstraction the idea of colour exclusive of extension, and of motion exclusive of both colour and extension" (Berkeley 17).

Abstraction, in the philosophical sense, is not simply generalizing to talk about qualities that two or more entities share, although this is one important facet of it. Abstraction is also the ability to consider a single quality of a single entity exclusive of the entity's other qualities. So, in the last sentence of the quotation, we see that "the mind can frame to itself by abstracting the idea of colour exclusive of extension," etcetera. The abstractionist account of general terms is that if, for example, I saw an apple, I could abstract the apple's redness and plug that redness back in when I notice that the cap on the bottle of Jamison whiskey is also red.

Thus, in the abstractionist account, we come by general terms: pluck one quality out of the set of qualities composing one object and pluck the same (or a very similar) quality out of the set composing some other object. This gives us a "redness" which is not tied to any particular instantiation of the color red. Fogelin speaks of this as the ability to "abstract a 'determinable' distinct from any of its specific determinations" (Fogelin 109). He continues, "For example, presented with a variety of differing figures and magnitudes, the mind is supposed to be able to abstract a notion of something common to all, namely, extension" (109). By this process, we are able to speak generally of redness (and the same for all other qualities). The final way to abstract is that of "complex or compounded ideas" (Berkeley's term). Fogelin simply quotes Berkeley's explanation, and I will follow suit:

> "For example, the mind having observed that Peter, James, and John resemble each other, in certain common agreements of shape and other qualities, leaves out of the complex or compounded idea it has of Peter, James, and any other particular man, that which is peculiar to each, retaining only what is common to all; and so makes an abstract idea wherein the particulars equally partake, abstracting entirely from and cutting off all those circumstances and differences, which might determine it to any particular existence" (Berkeley 19 quoted in Fogelin 109)

To make a brief resume of Berkeley's take on abstraction, we have three manners of abstraction: the ability to frame qualities exclusive of those with which they are presented to us ("the mind frames to itself by abstraction the idea of colour exclusive of extension…"), the ability to abstract to speak of general terms, and the ability to simplify a complex idea down to only those qualities shared equally by each similar complex idea. Recall from Fogelin that Berkeley has two jobs: to show that abstraction is false and to give a satisfactory account of general terms (Fogelin 109). The stage is set for Berkeley's answer – which answer comes as a jumbled response to both of these tasks.

Berkeley's position is that mind is constantly moving to generalize and organize experiences but is engaged in so doing such that it neither abstracts a single quality exclusive of others, nor abstracts a single quality in order to speak generally, nor simplifies complex ideas to gain only the equally shared qualities. How so? As previously stated Berkeley endorses what is called "particularism," or the theory of perception which says that no matter how hard you try to conceive of a single quality at a time, you must be conceiving of a single quality of a single entity (Berkeley 10). You can get particular, you can get specific, and you can think with clarity about one certain aspect… of a certain thing. Here is the clincher: if that certain aspect is tied to that certain thing, it is always really a quality as it relates to the other qualities of the entity.

Try it for yourself, says Berkeley: can you picture extension without thinking of something extended? Can you picture color without thinking of something colored? Can you picture motion without thinking of something moving? Of course not (14). Abstracts lack explanatory power; or, to put that in a more Berkeleyan way, abstracts exist only to cause scruples. As Fields notes, "The cause of scruples is not 'the obscurity of things, or the natural weakness and imperfection of our understanding', as Locke would have us believe, but rather abuse of language stemming from 'the opinion that the mind hath a framing abstract ideas or notions of things' (Field 100). In short, if we want to move beyond mere philosophical bickering and scruples, we must lose the chief scruple-causer, the opinion that the mind has the power of framing to itself abstract idea.

Fogelin summarizes that for Berkeley, "the commitment to abstract ideas has not only been nonproductive, it has been an actual source of error. The root error, for Berkeley, is the thought that we can form, through the power of abstraction, the idea of something existing that is neither a perceiver nor a thing perceived" (113). Fields writes that "by placing his attack on abstract ideas in the introduction Berkeley intends to clear the reader's mind of any lingering false principles in preparation for the philosophical arguments presented in the main text" (Field 100). The question at this point is how we are to rid ourselves of the opinion that the mind has the power of framing abstract ideas.

Berkeley's suggestion is that if the old names for things are confusing (if our old philosophical terminology constantly makes us assume, like sliding into a rut on a dirt road, the power of framing abstract ideas), we should switch up our names and start again from top (Berkeley 21). The idea is that reworking our language, even given the difficulty of this project, is the proper way of dealing with abstract ideas (22a). The work of discerning agreements and disagreements between one's thoughts equals out to attentiveness to one's own understanding (22b). In other words, here is our solution: we know that we have given bad definitions for words in the past. So, let us start with a new slate of words and pay sharp attention to our further use of these words to make sure we do not contradict ourselves and invent new errors or reinvent old errors by sliding back into the rut of abstract ideas.

Conclusion

Berkeley finishes his Introduction to A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge with an appeal to the reader. If the reader wants to understand what Berkeley is saying about (namely, what follows in the main text of the Principles), then the reader must make himself think the sorts of thoughts that Berkeley had to think in the way that Berkeley had to think them for him to conclude that his idealism paints the right picture of our experiences. This appeal makes good sense given Berkeley's solution to the problem of thinking that the mind has the power to frame abstract ideas. He is asking you not merely to think hard and do good philosophy; he is asking you to first take the philosophy you already know and toss it to the side such that you can start fresh with new terminology and from this point examine and explain the world marked out by your experience.

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