§1. Locke on abstract ideas

T1 ‘[w]e make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex Idea…that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all.’ (Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding §3.3.7, N 411)

§2. Berkeley on abstract ideas

T2 ‘…what seems to have… occasioned innumerable errors and difficulties in almost all parts of knowledge. And that is the opinion that the mind hath a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things.’ (PHK Intro. §6, p.90)

Does Berkeley deny that we can separate or subtract ideas from one another…?

T3 ‘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.’ (PHK Intro. §10, p.92-93)

T4 ‘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.’ (PHK Intro. §10, p.93)

Abstract ideas and general ideas…

P1 Every non-abstract idea is an idea of a particular thing.
C1 Either we have abstract ideas or all of our ideas are ideas of particular things.
P2 Some of our ideas are ideas of general types of thing.
C2 We have abstract ideas.

Does Berkeley reject P2…?

T5 ‘I do not deny absolutely there are general Ideas, but only that there are any abstract general Ideas.’ (PHK Intro. §12, p.94)

Berkeley rejects a hidden assumption…

P3 No idea can be both an idea of a particular thing and also an idea of general type of thing.
Dr Rob Watt  
Faculty of Philosophy

‘...an idea, which considered in itself is particular, becomes general, by being made to represent or stand for all other particular Ideas of the same sort.’ (PHK Intro. §12, p.94)

‘[a general term] owes its generality, not to its being the sign of an abstract or general line, but of all particular right lines that may possibly exist...’ (PHK Intro. §12, p.94)

But what does it mean to say that an idea of a particular triangle represents or stands for or is a sign of all other triangles...?

'What more easy than for anyone to look a little into his own Thoughts, and there try whether he has, or can attain to have, an Idea that shall correspond with the description that is here given of the general Idea of a Triangle which is, neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalenon, but all and none of these at once?' (PHK Intro. §13, p.95)

The first triangle argument...

P1 An abstract idea of a triangle is an idea of a figure that is (a) equilateral, (b) isosceles, and (c) scalene.
P2 Necessarily, no figure is (a) equilateral (b) isosceles and (c) scalene.
C1 An abstract idea of a triangle is an idea of an impossible object.
P3 We cannot have an idea of an impossible object.
C2 We cannot have an abstract idea of a triangle.

The second triangle argument...

P1 An abstract idea of a triangle is an idea of a figure that is (a) three sided, (b) not equilateral, (c) not isosceles, and (d) not scalene.
P2 Necessarily, every figure that is (a) three sided is either (b) equilateral, (c) isosceles, or (d) scalene.
C1 An abstract idea of a triangle is an idea of an impossible object.
P3 We cannot have an idea of an impossible object.
C2 We cannot have an abstract idea of a triangle.

The abstract idea of a triangle contains the idea of being three sided, but it does not contain the idea of being equilateral, or of being isosceles, or of being scalene.

It doesn’t follow from this that the abstract idea of a triangle contains the idea of not being equilateral, and of not being isosceles, and of not being scalene.

‘It is like arguing that since my idea of a movie starlet contains no specification of what color hair she must have, it is therefore the idea of a girl with hair of no color.’ (George Pitcher, Berkeley, p.69)

Berkeley assumes that our ideas are determinate.
T10 ‘…the image of a fully-clothed movie starlet contains, we may assume, no representation of… any particular number of navels on her body…’ (George Pitcher, Berkeley, p.70)

§3. The geometry argument

P1 Unless we have an abstract idea of a triangle, we can only prove things about the properties of particular triangles.

P2 It isn’t true that we can only prove things about the properties of particular triangles.

C We have an abstract idea of a triangle.

T11 ‘…though the idea I have in view whilst I make the demonstration, be, for instance, that of an isosceles rectangular triangle… I may nevertheless be certain it extends to all other rectilinear triangles. And that, because neither the right angle, nor the equality… are at all concerned in the demonstration. It is true, the diagram I have in view includes all these particulars, but then there is not the least mention made of them in the proof of the proposition.’ (PHK Intro. §16, p.97)

§4. More arguments for abstract ideas

The man and beast argument

T12 ‘[Locke] has given it very much countenance by seeming to think the having abstract general ideas is what puts the widest difference in point of understanding betwixt man and beast.’ (PHK Intro. §11, p.93)

T13 ‘…it is in this that the species of brutes are discriminated from men, and ’tis that proper difference wherein they are wholly separated.’ (Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding §2.11.11, N160)

P1 Unless we have abstract ideas, there is no difference in kind between the minds of human beings and the minds of other animals.

P2 There is a difference in kind between the minds of human beings and the minds of other animals.

C We have abstract ideas.

T14 ‘I readily agree… that the faculties of brutes can by no means attain to abstraction. But then if this be made the distinguishing property of that sort of animals, I fear a great many of those that pass for men must be reckoned into their number.’ (PHK Intro. §11, p.93)

The language argument...

P1 Unless we have abstract ideas, we cannot communicate with one another.
We can communicate with one another.

We have abstract ideas.

The mental effort objection...

‘...it is on all hands agreed that there is need of great toil and labour of the mind, to emancipate our thoughts from particular objects, and raise them to those sublime speculations that are conversant about abstract ideas. From all which the natural consequence should seem to be, that so difficult a thing as the forming abstract ideas was not necessary for communication, which is so easy and familiar to all sorts of men.’ (PHK Intro. §14, p.95-96)

The mental effort objection...

Mental effort is a necessary condition of forming abstract ideas.

Mental effort is not a necessary condition of communicating.

Forming abstract ideas is not a necessary condition of communicating.

‘...we are told, if they seem obvious and easy to grown men, it is only because by constant and familiar use they are made so.’ (PHK Intro. §14, p.96)

Mental effort is a necessary condition of forming abstract ideas for children.

Forming abstract ideas is a necessary condition of communicating.

Mental effort is a necessary of communicating for children.

‘Is it not a hard thing to imagine, that a couple of children cannot prate together, of their sugar-plumbs and rattles and the rest of their little trinkets, till they have first tacked together numberless inconsistencies, and so framed in their minds abstract general ideas, and annexed them to every common name they make use of?’ (PHK Intro. §14, p.96)

§5. Abstract ideas and realism

‘If we thoroughly examine this tenet, 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?’ (PHK §5, p.104)

References