A CATEGORIAL DIFFICULTY IN BERKELEY

Harry A. Nielsen

August 15, 1980
A CATEGORIAL DIFFICULTY IN BERKELEY

Abstract

In Principles of Human Knowledge Berkeley speaks of the sensible qualities of an apple (its colour, taste, smell, etc.) as being its parts. The paper argues that our words for sense-qualities play a role so unlike that of part-words (stem, core, skin) that verbal atrocities would result from treating qualities as parts. Berkeley lends a surface plausibility to this move by focusing on a narrow selection of the normal linguistic accompaniment of the noun 'apple'. He puts out of mind the language of 'doing things with apples'—peeling, dicing, and so on—which when recalled shows how strikingly far apart are the two categories he tries to mingle.
A Categorial Difficulty in Berkeley

In his *Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley assures us that the only thing his philosophy banishes is "that which philosophers call matter" (#35), Locke's unseen and never experienced "material substance" (#17) which supposedly holds together the sensible qualities of apples, turtles, houses and so forth (#68). Since in daily life people do not speak of any such substratum, Berkeley can strike up an uneasy alliance with the bulk of mankind. On the other hand, most of us feel uncomfortable at being told that our clothes, for instance, are congeries of ideas, or that the butcher weighs up ideas for his customers. Aware of the jarring nature of his claims, Berkeley presents the reader with a distinction that will make them easier to take:

In the ordinary affairs of life, any phrases may be retained, so long as they excite in us proper sentiments, or dispositions to act in such a manner as is necessary for our well-being, how false soever they may be if taken in a strict and speculative sense. (#52)

The distinction is between a "strict and speculative" way of speaking and "those inaccurate modes of speech which use has made inevitable."

If we ask in precisely what respect our everyday modes of speech are inaccurate, Berkeley is ready with a two-step answer. First, "language is suited to the received opinions, which are not always the truest" (#52). Which of our received opinions is in question here? It is "an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, 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", an opinion which conceals "a manifest contradiction". That is, it contradicts a dictum that Berkeley takes over directly from Locke, namely that a person perceives nothing directly except his own ideas and sensations. With this in mind we can pick out the modes of speech that Berkeley calls inaccurate. Briefly, they are those in which common nouns such as 'apple' and 'house' turn up as the objects of our verbs of perception:

"He spotted two enemy tanks across the river."
"We heard a door slam."

Numberless sentences like these clash, in Berkeley's view, with the dictum that perception is of mental content only.

This calls to mind Wittgenstein's description of disputes between Idealists and Realists:

The one party attack the normal form of expression as if they were attacking a statement; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being (Philosophical Investigations, I, #403).

The first part of this description seems to fit Berkeley quite well, for he directs his criticism against "inaccurate modes of speech" without singling out a particular assertion. It is as if Berkeley, looking at the sentence "We heard a door slam", could hear, or imagine he hears, a whisper: "You see? We can perceive something besides our own ideas and sensations!" The fault thus resides in the form of expression itself, every instance of which partakes of the inaccuracy.

Curiously, though, Berkeley is not out to promote an improved form of expression. In #51 he writes:

...A little reflection on what is here said will make it manifest that the common use of language would receive no manner of alteration or disturbance from the admission of our tenets.

Why should he be so tolerant of the abiding flaw he finds in that mode of speech? The answer lies in his analysis of nouns such as 'apple' and 'door'. Our casual way of joining a perception-verb to one of those nouns is, for Berkeley, a linguistic bad habit, a little like the habit of using slang but with an unfortunate side-effect: it tends to cloud our understanding of what apples and doors really are. Our bad habit expedites discourse--reforms on the level of common speech would more than likely prove to be impediments--but at the cost of obscuring the correct definitions of those nouns.

For Berkeley, then, any improvement of language belongs on the plane of definitions and not of speech or written prose. In the Principles he comes out in effect for a new style of definition for the nouns we use to designate sensible objects, a style modeled for him by Locke, though not in a manner entirely to his liking. He sketches out the makings of the new-style definition in his opening
paragraph: "...for example a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple; other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a book, a tree, and the like sensible things...". Setting aside the headaches involved in actually compiling a dictionary along these lines-- for example the range of variation in the colour, taste and smell of apples-- the advantage of this kind of definition would lie in its keeping us mindful of the channels by which we know that something presented to us is an apple. It would not define 'apple' by means of other nouns like 'apple', such as 'a pome fruit', but by adjectives such as 'rounded' and 'usually red'.

It now appears that Berkeley can be tolerant of the "manifest contradiction" in our normal mode of speech because he views it as an effect of overcompression. A decompressed, wholly adjectival definition of 'apple' would at least weaken the temptation to suppose there is something "without the mind" about apples. The word 'apple' is, in Berkeley's eyes, an abbreviation for 'the collection of ideas to which we give the name apple'. This longer phrase is an algebraic expression for the more accurate definition Berkeley favours, its variables to be filled in with descriptions of the typical perceptions we associate with apples.

A difficulty begins to show itself when we ask: What is the connection between (a) the perceptual experiences described in that Berkeleyan definition and (b) an apple? Berkeley's answer in #1 is given in a single word: those perceptions constitute an apple. Here and at many other points in the text Berkeley makes a linguistic jump. He jumps, that is, from an account of an apple's "sensible qualities or ideas" (#95) to an account of what the parts of an apple are. In #60 the jump takes place in plain view when he speaks of "...the variety of internal parts (of vegetables and animals), so elegantly contrived and put together; which, being ideas, have nothing powerful or operative in them..." (Italics mine). In English, as anyone can observe, the word 'part' does not function at all like our words for "colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence" (#1). Whether we are speaking of apples, gasoline engines, or any of countless other things, a gulf separates the word 'part' from the words we use for sensible qualities.

A few illustrations. We have numerous expressions of the form, "Hand me that part --the muffler clamp," and "Throw that part-- the applecore-- into the rubbish", but the
words in Berkeley's list do not turn up in sentences of that form, e.g., "Hand me that part -- the smell" or "Throw the shape away but keep the rest". "Which part connects with this loose wire?" is correct, as is "Take half the loaf with you" but not "Which fragrance connects with..." or "Take half the flavour with you". "Don't eat the stem" will go, but not "Don't eat the roundness". A reader can make up examples faster than I can write them down to show that the word 'part' and its kin are, at most, rarely interchangeable with our words for sensible qualities. The parts of an apple, as diagrammed and labeled in primers of botany, are literally in another genus from its sensible qualities. To say that the roundness of an apple or the warmth of an overcoat is a part of that apple or overcoat, is to commit a solecism. Solecistic for the same reason is Berkeley's use of the verb 'constitute' in sentences such as "The hardness or softness, the colour, taste, warmth, figure, or suchlike qualities, which combined together constitute the several sorts of victuals and apparel, have been shewn to etc." (#38). Here the interchanging of 'part' words and 'sensible qualities' words is packed into Berkeley's choice of the verb.

If the grammars of 'part' words and 'quality' words diverge as sharply as I have tried to indicate, and if colour, taste and other sensible qualities cannot by any stretching of language be forced into the same category as apple stems and overcoat collars, then a serious unclarity mars the Principles from its opening paragraph and stalls the project far short of any question about its truth or falsity. The reader fetches up against a mystery: how does Berkeley come to conflate sensible qualities and parts? What safe-looking steps-- for it would be entirely out of order to speak of carelessness here-- lead him to run those categories together? Or if that makes it sound too sequential, then what background factors contribute to the forgetting of so familiar a distinction? In the near surroundings one finds, for example, the empiricist stand against innate ideas, Berkeley's polemic against abstract ideas, the Lockean use of the word 'idea', the tenet Esse est percipi, and of course Locke's unknowable substrate, matter.

In trying to untangle the knot I asked: under what circumstances would it cause no disquiet or grammatical strain to treat sensible qualities as parts of an object, say an apple? Well, for one thing, when I am not doing to an actual apple any of the things people ordinarily do, as indicated in this sample list of verbs:
Many of these verbs take part-expressions as their grammatical objects. For example, one can cut, bite into, chew up and swallow an apple, but it makes no sense to apply those verbs to the taste or smell of the apple. Clearly, then, in a great many of our dealings with apples, confusing sensible qualities with parts can only lead us into grammatical atrocities and dead ends which Berkeley would be the last to tolerate.

This much tells us that in the Principles he contrives to position himself toward apples and the like quite differently from the way people do when those verbs of action apply. He is not interested in doing anything to or with apples. Instead, he situates himself in relation to apples in such a way as to be able to think of their sensible qualities as parts without running afoul of grammar. But what sort of relation to apples, we could ask, is that? Since it is evidently not one of reacting with actual apples in the range of ordinary ways, all of which require us to be strictly attentive to the categorial difference between quality and part, we must look elsewhere. It then occurred to me to ask: in connection with what sort of apple is it all right to call the qualities parts and the parts qualities? Think of a watercolour-apple in a still life painting. It is constituted, as Berkeley would say, of patches of red and russet highlighted with white. It lacks other sense-qualities of apples, but perhaps one could supply some of those by using apple-juice instead of water as a painting medium. That would give us the scent of apple and, for a short time, the taste. We could now say that taste, colour, visual form and scent are the parts of that watercolour-apple, a complete list of the items that go to make it up. At any rate, speaking in this way of a watercolour-apple would not land us in the kind of trouble we encountered earlier in speaking of the qualities of actual apples as parts.

Berkeley, on the other hand, wants to apply that way of speaking to actual apples, and we are looking into the question of how he avoids the ungainly combinations that arise from this. To work closer to an understanding, consider the tenet Esse est percipi, and ask once more: when is it acceptable to speak of the sensible qualities of
an apple as its parts? Answer: when we are speaking only indirectly about the apple, but directly about perceptions of the apple. In that circumstance it is possible to abstain from using any verbs except the verbs of perception—see, taste, smell, etc.—avoiding the verbs on our list which involve doing things with an apple over and above perceiving it.

Next we ask: when we take care to speak only of a person's perception of an apple, and keep carefully out of mind such information about the apple's structure as we might get from doing something muscular to the apple such as cutting it in half, what shall we count as the parts of the apple? This is an uncommon question, to be sure, but I believe it is very like the one Berkeley puts to himself and then answers. More precisely, in #1 he tells us what the parts of someone's perception of an apple are: the colour and shape seen, the feelings of smoothness, roundness and resistance, the fragrance and so forth.

I have tried to reconstruct the technique by which Berkeley succeeds in making himself comfortable with a desperately awkward conflation of parts and sensible qualities, which if allowed into discourse would create havoc. His technique consists in selecting out of the normal grammar or verbal accompaniment of a noun such as 'apple' only those expressions which have to do with identifying the object, or assigning the correct name to it. In the familiar experience of perceiving and recognizing an apple we can of course distinguish elements contributed by the various organs of sense, and with this in mind Berkeley proceeds to tell us that these percepts are parts of the apple or constitute the apple. Under ordinary conditions an occurrence of those percepts does in fact suffice as grounds for calling something an apple, and if naming it correctly exhausted our interest in the object, it would scarcely matter one way or the other how we described its constitution. However, given our stake as human beings in apples, other foodstuffs and sensible objects at large, it matters a great deal.

Berkeley thus develops his case by putting out of mind, and getting his reader to do the same, extensive areas of the language we use in connection with apples, and by retaining only so much of it as might be employed in describing how we recognize something as being an apple. The language of perception and naming is all he is concerned with in the sections of the Principles dealing with sensible objects, so he simply detaches and lets drift out of mind the language of what we might call
'doing things with apples'. What is left lends itself to an esse est percipi interpretation far more readily than the language of doing. Our wider interest in doing a whole catalogue of things with apples is in one sense presupposed in the Principles: at least Berkeley nowhere makes us out to be purely contemplative spirits. He does not, however, permit the language of doing things to contribute to his understanding of how apples, stones, houses and nightingales are constituted. Instead he bases his analysis of sensible objects on a severely truncated account of how we speak of them. Though it is a safe enough account as far as it goes, it can mislead us into supposing that perception alone, in abstraction from everything we do with apples and the like, informs us as to how they are constituted. In this respect, and despite a warm spot for the commonsensical, Berkeley reveals himself as the closest thing to a purely contemplative spirit in all of philosophy. This, in view of his multifarious doings in Ireland and the New World, I find amazing.

Harry A. Nielsen
Department of Philosophy
University of Windsor
Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4