Berkeley on Substantial Forms (?)

Scholastics (from Pasnau 2004): Individuals are composites of matter and substantial forms, where a substantial form (broadly construed) includes:
1. A principle that completes the essence of a thing and gives it its definition, individuating it from other things.
2. An explanatory principle serving as the internal cause of a thing’s accidental properties.
3. The basis for a thing’s substantial unity and identity over time.
4. (?) The expression of a thing’s final cause (in some teleological sense).

Averros: “The substantial form is what gives a thing ‘its name and definition’ (Physics I.63)” (Pasnau 2004, 33)

Suarez: “The end of the substantial form is ‘to constitute and complete the essence of a natural being’ (DM 15.1.18)” (Pasnau 2004, 33)

The Coimbrans: “A substantial form is “that in which the natural essence of any composite is principally contained, or what completes the essence of a thing and its definition, and distinguishes it from others’. (Physics 1.9.10.1)” (Pasnau 2004, 34)

Proposal A: For Berkeley, sensible objects (tables, trees, etc.) are composites of subjective ideas and divine linguistic forms (modeled on substantial forms), where divine linguistic forms include:
1. A principle that completes the essence of a thing and gives it its definition, individuating it from other things.
2. An explanatory principle serving as the [reason for] a thing’s accidental properties (where those accidental properties just are subjective ideas).
3. The basis for a thing’s substantial unity and identity over time.
4. (?) The expression of a thing’s final cause (in some teleological sense).

Proposal B: Reading Berkeley according to Proposal A might help unravel two textual puzzles:

i. He claims that he is not a subjective idealist.
ii. The role of his perceptual relativity arguments in defense of his idealism.

How does Proposal A make sense of (i)? Sensible objects are objective (external, universal) in their form – which is the source of their essence – and only subjective in their accidents.

How does Proposal A make sense of (ii)? Berkeley is in a position to claim that perceptual relativity does not imply relativity of substantial unity, as seems to be the case for materialists. Rather, the divine linguistic form that is a thing’s essence remains unified and persists despite radical differences in the character of the accidents used to suggest it under different perceptual circumstances.

First Textual Puzzle: Berkeley Says He’s Not A Subjective Idealist

Berkeley for Subjective Idealism
“For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their esse is percepi, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.” PHK 3.

“But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so… but what is all this… more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This… only shews you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it does not shew that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas.” PHK 23.

Berkeley Against Subjective Idealism

“…it will be objected that by the foregoing principles all that is real and substantial in nature is banished out of the world, and instead thereof a chimical scheme of ideas takes place. All things that exist, exist only in the mind… What therefore becomes of the sun, moon and stars? … Are all these but so many chimeras and illusions of the fancy? To all which… I answer, that by the principles premised we are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or anywise conceive or understand remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a rerum natura [nature of things, order of nature (?)], and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force.” (PHK 34)

“To me it is evident… that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that, seeing they depend not on my thought, and have all existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other Mind wherein they exist.” (DHP 212, my emphasis.)

“Take here in brief my meaning. It is evident that the things I perceive are my own ideas, and that no idea can exist unless it be in a mind. Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure the particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. They must therefore exist in some other mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me.” (DHP 214-15, my emphasis.)

“When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now, it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind; since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other Mind wherein they exist… And as the same is true with regard to all other finite created spirits, it necessarily follows there is an omnipresent eternal Mind, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules, as He Himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the laws of nature.” (DHP 230-1, my emphasis.)
Divine Language: Linguistic Forms

“… the proper Objects of Vision constitute an universal Language of the Author of Nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our Actions, in order to attain those things, that are necessary to the Preservation and Well-being of our Bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their Information that we are principally guided in all the Transactions and Concerns of Life. And the manner wherein they signify, and mark unto us the Objects which are at a Distance, is the same with that of Languages and Signs of Humane Appointment…” (NTV 147, my emphasis)

“It is, I say, evident from what has been said in the foregoing parts of this Treatise, and in sect. 147 and elsewhere of the Essay concerning Vision, that visible ideas are the Language whereby the Governing Spirit on whom we depend informs us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint upon us, in case we excite this or that motion in our own bodies.” PHK 44.

Since you cannot deny that the great Mover and Author of nature constantly explains Himself to the eyes of men by the sensible intervention of arbitrary signs, which have no similitude or connexion with the things signified; so as be compounding and disposing them, to suggest and exhibit an endless variety of objects, differing in nature, time, and place; thereby informing and directing us how to act with respect to things distant and future, as well as near and present. (Alciphron VI.12.)

Sensible Objects

It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind; or lastly, ideas formed by help of memory and imagination- either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours, with their several degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more and less either as to quantity or degree. Smelling furnishes me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, 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 tree, a book, and the like sensible things- which as they are pleasing or disagreeable excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth. (PHK 1.)

…men combine together several ideas, apprehended by diverse senses, or by the same sense at different times or in different circumstances, but however observed to have some connection in nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name and consider as one thing. … But… my aim is only to know what ideas are connected together; and the more a man knows of the connection of ideas, the more he is said to know of the nature of things. (DHP 245.)

Substantial Forms?
But for a fuller Illustration of this Matter, it ought to be considered that Number (however some may reckon it amongst the primary Qualities) is nothing fixed and settled, really existing in things themselves. It is intirely the Creature of the Mind, considering, either an Idea by it self, or any Combination of Ideas to which it gives one Name, and so makes it pass for an Unite. According as the Mind variously combines its Ideas, the Unite varies: and as the Unite, so the Number, which is only a Collection of Unites, doth also vary. We call a Window one, a Chimney one; and yet a House in which there are many Windows, and many Chimneys, hath an equal right to be called one, and many Houses go to the making of one City. In these and the like Instances, it is evident the Unite constantly relates to the particular Draughts the Mind makes of its Ideas, to which it affixes Names, and wherein it includes more or less, as best suits its own Ends and Purposes. Whatever therefore the Mind considers as one, that is an Unite. Every Combination of Ideas is considered as one thing by the mind, and in token thereof is marked by one Name. Now, this naming and combining together of Ideas is perfectly arbitrary, and done by the Mind in such sort, as Experience shews it to be most convenient: Without which, our Ideas had never been collected into such sundry distinct Combinations as they now are. NTV 109

Now the set rules or established methods wherein the Mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the laws of nature; and these we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things. This gives us a sort of foresight which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And without this we should be eternally at a loss; we could not know how to act anything that might procure us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us; that to sow in the seed-time is the way to reap in the harvest; and in general that to obtain such or such ends, such or such means are conducive- all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of nature, without which we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born. PHK 30-1.

_Hyl._ Things! you may pretend what you please; but it is certain, you leave us nothing but empty forms of things, the outside only which strikes the senses.

_Phil._ What you call the empty forms and outside of things seems to me the very sensible things themselves. Nor are they empty or incomplete otherwise than, upon your supposition, that matter is an essential part of all corporeal things. We both therefore agree in this, that we perceive only sensible forms; but herein we differ, you will have them to be empty appearances, I real beings. DHP 245-6.

_Hyl._ I am clearly convinced that I see things in their native forms, and am no longer in pain about their unknown natures or absolute existence. ... You set out upon the same principles that Academics, Cartesians, and the like sects usually do; and for a long time it looked as if you were advancing their philosophical skepticism; but in the end you conclusions are directly opposite to theirs. DHP 265 (the very end of DHP).