

LANGUAGE AND THE STRUCTURE OF BERKELEY'S WORLD

by

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Abbreviations

- Alc Berkeley, George. (1732) 2010. *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher*. In Jaffro, Brykman, and Schwartz 2010, 17–274.
- An Berkeley, George. (1734) 1992. *The Analyst: or, A Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician*. In Jesseph 1992, 159–221.
- BW Luce, A. A., and T. E. Jessop, eds. 1948–1957. *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. By George Berkeley. 9 vols. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.
- CGB Hight, Marc A., ed. 2013b. *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CSM Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, trans. 1984–1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. By René Descartes. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- DFM Berkeley, George. (1735) 1948–1957. *A Defence of Free-thinking in Mathematics*. In BW, 4:109–141.
- DHP Berkeley, George. (1713) 2008. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. In Clarke 2008, 151–242.
- DM Berkeley, George. (1721) 2008. *An Essay on Motion*. In Clarke 2008, 243–267.
- EHU Locke, John. (1690) 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Enq Hume, David. (1748) 1999. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford Philosophical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LW Locke, John. 1823. *The Works of John Locke*. 10 vols. London: Thomas Tegg.
- MI Berkeley, George. 1987. *George Berkeley's Manuscript Introduction: An Editio Diplomatica*. Edited by Bertil Belfrage. Oxford: Doxa.
- N Berkeley, George. 1989. *Philosophical Commentaries*. Edited by George Hasson Thomas. The Philosophy of George Berkeley. Ohio: Garland.

- NTV Berkeley, George. (1709) 2008. *An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision*. In Clarke 2008, 1–66.
- PHK Berkeley, George. (1710) 2008. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In Clarke 2008, 67–149.
- PO Berkeley, George. (1712) 1948–1957. *Passive Obedience*. In BW, 6:15–46.
- Siris Berkeley, George. (1744) 1948–1957. *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-water, and divers other Subjects connected together and arising One from Another*. In BW, 5:31–164.
- THN Hume, David. (1739–1740) 2000. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford Philosophical Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- TVV Berkeley, George. (1733) 1998. *The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language, Shewing The Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity, Vindicated and Explained*. In *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, edited by Michael Ayers, 277–304. London: J. M. Dent.

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Introduction

According to George Berkeley, “the doctrine of signs [is] a point of great importance, and general extent, which, if duly considered, would cast no small light upon things, and afford a just and genuine solution to many difficulties” ([Alc](#), §7.16). As has long been recognized ([White 1955](#); [Winkler 2005a](#); [Brykman 2010](#), 407), this is certainly true of Berkeley’s own philosophy. However, although this fact has been recognized, the lesson has not been applied in a thorough and detailed way to the solution of problems in Berkeley’s philosophy. The aim of this dissertation is to argue that Berkeley believed that a proper understanding of signs – and, specifically, of *language* – could solve one of the most central difficulties of his philosophy, namely, the problem of showing how a world of fleeting ideas could exhibit the sort of robust *structure* attributed to physical reality by commonsense and Newtonian physics.

The Problem: Structure

Berkeley’s ontology is extraordinarily sparse. It consists only of ideas and the minds which perceive them. These ideas, I will argue in [chapter 2](#), are conceived of as sense data, or pure phenomenal ‘feels,’ with no intrinsic representational capacity. Furthermore, as Berkeley emphasizes ([DHP](#), 205, 245-246), ideas are ‘fleeting’ and ‘variable’

– one is always succeeded by another. Little or nothing remains constant in our experience. Yet these ideas are meant to be the building blocks of human thought, and of the world of bodies. How can these ever-changing sense experiences give rise to the sort of structure we routinely attribute to the world, in both commonsense and natural science? Further, given that these sense experiences are likewise the building blocks of our cognition of the world, how is it even possible for us to make such an attribution?

Two sorts of structure are of particular importance: the *co-instantiation* of qualities in single, enduring object perceived by more than one subject, and the relation of *physical causation*.¹ Under both the former and the latter heading, we must be able to address the relations between actually sensed qualities as well as those between the theoretical qualities (and quantities) introduced by natural science. Given Berkeley's sparse resources, we must explain the very possibility of our belief in such structure and, if Berkeley is to be a defender of commonsense, we must likewise give an account of how, on his theory, such beliefs can be *true*.

The Solution: Language

Berkeley's solution to this problem, I argue, lies in his theory of language. Berkeley repeatedly emphasizes the importance of the theory of signs, and specifically of language, to his philosophy. In the Introduction to the *Principles*, he describes his critique of abstraction as a discussion of "the nature and abuse of language" (PHK, Intro §6). Early

1. Spatio-temporal relations are likewise quite important, but will not be addressed in any detail. These relations are somewhat less problematic, insofar as visual sensations are, according to Berkeley, ordered in a visual space, and tangible sensations in a tangible space. Further, Berkeley holds that we derive our notion of time from the succession of ideas in our own minds (PHK, §98). However, problems remain. Insofar as the visual and tangible spaces we experience are simply relations within the momentary experience of a single perceiver, under a single sense modality, this is far more impoverished than our ordinary notion of space. Likewise, a single perceiver's subjective time is certainly not the ordinary notion of time. The latter issue is briefly addressed on pp. 252-253.

in the body of the *Principles*, he asserts that “an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of [immaterialism] by any one that shall attend to what is meant by the term ‘exist’ when applied to sensible things” (PHK, §3). More to the point, in the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas’s assertion that the variability of ideas renders an immaterialist account of co-instantiation impossible is alleged by Philonous “to have taken its rise from not rightly understanding the common language of men speaking of several distinct ideas, as united into one thing by the mind” (DHP, 245). Finally, in *De Motu* Berkeley says that realism about forces and the other theoretical entities by means of which physicists attribute structure to the world is a result of human thought “being obstructed by words which are poorly understood” (DM, §1).

Berkeley’s linguistic solution, I argue, works at two levels. At the first level, it is by the adoption of conventional rules that ideas, including words, become signs and acquire the sophisticated representational content which makes the attribution of structure possible. This is sufficient to explain how it is possible for us to represent the world as structured. However, as I argue in chapter 7, Berkeley holds onto a realist conception of truth on which some sort of matching with objective reality is required. Thus if our representation of the world *as* structured is to be a *true* (faithful) representation, the world must somehow *be* structured. It is here that the second level of Berkeley’s solution enters the picture. According to Berkeley, the perceived world *is itself a language* – or, rather, a *discourse* in a language. Berkeley intends this claim quite literally. It is the *linguistic* structure of the perceived world that our thought and speech about co-instantiation, physical causation, and other structural concepts aims to capture. In this way, I argue, Berkeley succeeds in preserving the commonsense and scientific structure of the perceived world.

Aims and Methodology

This dissertation is an exercise in the history of philosophy. History of philosophy, as a discipline, might be described as *intellectual history in the service of philosophy*. The historian of philosophy is part of the broader philosophical enterprise, struggling to come to grips with some of the deepest and most difficult questions which have been asked by human beings, and she hopes, by engagement with the history of human thought, to shed some light on these questions.

There are many different ways of approaching this task. In Anglophone philosophy, it is presently customary to divide these approaches into two camps, known as *analytic* and *contextual* (see Watson 2012).² One may say, rather crudely, that the analytic historian of philosophy approaches his task by reading the classic writings of the Great Dead Philosophers and applying to them the same sort of logical *analysis* he would apply to the work of a living philosopher. On the other side of this crude contrast, the contextual historian approaches her task by immersing herself in the intellectual context of the time and place in which some Great Dead Philosopher lived and wrote, in order to understand how the Great Dead Philosopher's ideas came about. Having drawn this crude contrast, one may proceed to criticize the analytic historian as unhistorical, and the contextual historian as unphilosophical.

Somewhat less crudely, one may position historians of philosophy on a spectrum, with 'pure' intellectual history at one extreme and the casual use of quotations from the Great Dead Philosophers in the course of philosophical argument at the other. It is then incumbent on the historian to situate her project in some region of this spectrum and explain why such a project is valuable.

2. Watson, however, prefers the term 'historicist history of philosophy' over the more common moniker 'contextual history of philosophy.'

To me it seems that every region of the spectrum has its value for the project of gaining philosophical insight by means of historical insight. However, it seems to me that the contextual must precede the analytic. I take this position because it is a presupposition of my historical work that the philosophers being studied *are indeed great philosophers*, and precisely insofar as they are great philosophers it is to be assumed that the positions they actually held, and the arguments they actually made, as the philosophers themselves understood them, are likely to be superior to the positions and arguments which emerge from casual readings of a handful of well-known texts. Thus if we wish to gain maximum philosophical insight from the study of a particular Great Dead Philosopher, we must begin by seeing things from that philosopher's perspective, by understanding his philosophical aims and concerns, and the particular arguments and positions to which he was responding.

On the other hand, if we are to do history of philosophy, and not pure intellectual history, we cannot stop here, for this contextual approach will usually leave the relevance of the Great Dead Philosopher's arguments and positions to our own concerns in doubt. We must proceed to take a more analytic approach and show how these arguments and positions can be brought to bear on contemporary issues.

I am in no way opposed to division of labor in these tasks. From the fact that the enterprise of history of philosophy requires for its success both contextual and analytic approaches, it does not follow that every individual practitioner must do both. Nevertheless, I have attempted both sorts of tasks in this dissertation. In particular, this dissertation exhibits a constant movement from the contextual to the analytic. This can be seen in the 'big picture' structure of the dissertation, in which the first four chapters are focused primarily on the historical development of Berkeley's theory of language, and the last five focus on analysis and application. It can also, I hope, be seen on a smaller

scale throughout. My aim is to begin by understanding Berkeley in his own context, before transposing his theories and arguments into ours. To achieve the latter task, I have been liberal in offering comparisons between Berkeley and various philosophers influential in the analytic tradition, especially Wittgenstein and Quine.

At this point, one must surely ask, why Berkeley? Does Berkeley really have so much to say to contemporary philosophical concerns?

The answer, I believe, is a resounding ‘yes,’ and the comparisons to Wittgenstein and Quine are among the reasons why. If my interpretation is correct, Berkeley anticipates the (in)famous ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy, and also the idea of ‘meaning as use.’ Furthermore, Berkeley holds that language is essential to all general thought. These developments drive much of his metaphysics and epistemology. At the same time, the position Berkeley ends up in has major differences from Wittgenstein and Quine, particularly in Berkeley’s relatively traditional positions on God and the human mind. Thus one may say that, from the perspective of analytic philosophy, Berkeley’s premises look surprisingly contemporary, while some of his conclusions look surprisingly old-fashioned, and others look just plain surprising. As a result it becomes extremely important to understand just what is driving Berkeley’s arguments, whether the arguments work, what are the costs of accepting the conclusions, and, should the conclusions prove too costly, what can be done to escape them.

The principal project of this dissertation is sympathetic exposition, but it is exposition of arguments as well as positions, and this exposition aims to be a step toward an evaluation of these arguments and positions, with the ultimate hope of shedding light on the philosophical issues at stake. Furthermore, one has not really gained understanding of a philosophical argument unless one has understood the assumptions on which the

argument is built and the possible ways of escape. As a result, although a full philosophical evaluation of Berkeley's arguments and theories is left for future work, I do, at a number of points, indicate what I take to be the most pressing problems for Berkeley, and the best ways of escape for those who find Berkeley's final theory untenable. Additionally, the interpretation of Berkeley I provide is organized around his response to what I take to be the single most pressing problem for his philosophy as a whole, namely, the problem of structure.

Summary of the Chapters

I begin, in chapter 1, by identifying and explaining the view Berkeley describes as a 'received opinion' regarding language, namely, "that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas, and that every significant name stands for an idea" (PHK, Intro §19). I argue that Berkeley is not, as is often assumed, targeting Locke exclusively. Rather, Berkeley is correct in calling this a 'received opinion.' What Berkeley opposes is the reification of meanings, and this tendency in philosophy can be traced all the way back to Aristotle. I call the view Berkeley opposes 'the Theory of Meanings.' I examine three versions of the Theory of Meanings from Berkeley's immediate context – versions developed by the Port-Royalists (Antoine Arnauld, Claude Lancelot, and Pierre Nicole), John Locke, and John Sergeant – with the aim of showing that, despite their important differences, Berkeley's objections apply to all of them.

In chapter 2, I interpret Berkeley's critique of abstraction in light of the results of chapter 1. I argue that Berkeley is correct to characterize the critique of abstraction as an argument about "the nature and abuse of language" (Intro §6). Berkeley's anti-abstractionism is, in fact, a lemma in an argument against the Theory of Meanings. I argue that Berkeley succeeds in showing that the 'meanings' posited by the Theory of

Meanings would have to be entities of a quite unusual, and metaphysically suspicious, sort, and hence that Berkeley's sparser theory is to be preferred *if* it is able to make sense of the phenomena.

In chapter 3, I begin the task of reconstructing Berkeley's own theory of language by drawing together Berkeley's views on a variety of specific uses of language in his writings prior to *Alciphron* (1732). In particular, I examine Berkeley's theories of general terms, operative language (i.e., the use of language to influence emotions, actions, etc., in the absence of relevant ideas), and mathematical and scientific language.

Chapter 4 provides a commentary on the seventh dialogue of *Alciphron*. I argue that this dialogue provides a general theory of language, and not only a special-purpose account of certain sorts of religious discourse. Further, I argue that, contrary to Jonathan Bennett, David Berman, and others, Berkeley, in *Alciphron*, recognizes no sharp distinction between 'cognitive' and 'emotive' language. Although he recognizes what may be called 'cognitive' and 'emotive' *aspects of meaning*, he holds that all of our actual language contains a mixture of both. This chapter also lays the foundation for my interpretation of Berkeley's mature theory of language by showing that Berkeley radically rejects the Theory of Meanings and seeks to put in its place an account on which words get to be meaningful when they are used according to rules as part of a public social practice.

Chapter 5 is devoted to understanding the rules governing this social practice. I argue that Berkeley recognizes that one can follow the rules of language in the absence of explicit, articulable knowledge of those rules, and that one generally learns rules, not by being taught explicitly, but by environmental conditioning. Nevertheless, rule-following does require a certain sort of knowledge or understanding, namely, the ability to 'see' what the rule requires in actual or hypothetical circumstances, and to do the

required thing *because* one ‘sees’ it to be required. A consequence of this is what I call ‘Berkeley’s Internalist Requirement’ – that is, his view that, in order to follow a rule, I must *first* have some independent means of recognizing and distinguishing among the circumstances in which the rule requires me to perform or refrain from actions. This chapter further examines the sense in which the rules of language must be matters of *public convention* and, finally, provides an exposition of Berkeley’s formalist theory of inference.

In chapter 6, I apply the results of this study of Berkeley’s philosophy of language to questions of ontology. In particular, I show how Berkeley’s immaterialist metaphysical system follows from his theory of language. Along the way, I develop and defend a novel interpretation of Berkeley’s theory of bodies on which bodies, like forces, owe their existence and nature to the conventional rules of human thought and language.

If, however, the physical world is merely a creation of human thought and language, one would be right to wonder in what sense our thought and speech about it can be said to be *true*. This is the central question of chapter 7, in which I examine Berkeley’s conceptions of *assent* (belief) and *truth*. I argue, on the basis of Berkeley’s treatment of the subject in *Alciphron*, that Berkeley holds that belief, in general, is a matter of the *will* rather than the understanding. More precisely, to have a belief is to have certain dispositions to thought, feeling, speech, and action. This, however, renders the question of *truth* all the more pressing, since it is unclear how these sorts of dispositions can be understood to represent the world as being a certain way. I therefore survey a number of candidates for Berkeleian theories of truth, including deflationist, pragmatist, and Carnapian approaches, and argue that, while each gets something right, none is ultimately satisfactory. I argue that Berkeley’s ultimate view combines a basically realist conception of truth with a radical holism about meaning in a way that is, in certain respects,

anticipatory of the Wittgensteinian tradition in the philosophy of religion. Nevertheless, Berkeley retains a sufficiently realistic conception of truth to require some sort of corresponding objective reality.

The question of chapter 8 is, therefore, to what sort of underlying reality is our talk of bodies answerable? I argue that this question can be answered by attending to Berkeley's theory of the physical world as a great discourse 'spoken' by God. This claim of Berkeley's is, I argue, intended quite literally. He takes the world to have a structure quite similar to the structure of human languages. It is this *linguistic* structure – the *grammar* of the language of nature – that body talk, in plain language and in natural science, aims to capture.

Finally, in chapter 9, I apply the results of the foregoing chapters to two of the most difficult questions in Berkeley scholarship: Berkeley's claim to be an anti-skeptic and defender of commonsense, and his views about the status of objects not presently perceived by humans. I argue that Berkeley sees immaterialism as securing the gardener's knowledge of the cherry tree *without the gardener having to be an immaterialist*. This is because immaterialism amounts to explicit, articulable knowledge of the rules governing the gardener's linguistic practice. The gardener can, however, engage in that practice correctly, and thereby gain knowledge that his cherry tree exists, without having any meta-linguistic knowledge or belief of this sort. I then turn to Berkeley's defense of the correctness of the gardener's belief that his cherry tree exists when no human is in the garden. I argue that Berkeley holds that the truth of this claim is secured by the fact that *the conventional rules of the language of nature would require the tree to be perceived under specified circumstances*, and show how such an interpretation can make sense of Berkeley's notorious talk of divine ideas.

A Note on Terminology

A number of technical terms which are very important in the exposition of Berkeley's philosophy are unfortunately used in very different ways by different scholars. I have here attempted to use these terms in what I take to be the most historically well-motivated senses.

Following G. E. Moore (and the tradition he aimed to refute), I use the term '**idealism**' for the view that all of fundamental reality is *mental* or, if one prefers, *spiritual* (Moore 1903). Exactly what being 'mental' or 'spiritual' amounts to is perhaps rather contentious, but for purposes of Berkeley interpretation one may get a sufficient grasp of what is meant by 'idealism' by beginning with a Cartesian dualism of the mental and the physical, and then asserting that only those things on the mental side of that demarcation are metaphysically fundamental, so that the physical things, if they are to exist at all, must be reduced to the mental.

Following John Sergeant, I use the term '**ideism**' for the idea theory of perception and mental representation endorsed, in some form, by all, or nearly all, of the 'moderns' prior to Reid. Confusingly, this view is sometimes called 'idealism' or 'idea-ism.' Because 'ideism' is not in common use, I have often favored phrases like '**idea theory**' or '**Way of Ideas.**'

The terminology is further confused by the fact that it is far from clear that there is anything of substance held in common by the various ideists. Reading the discussion of the Lockean and Port-Royalist versions of ideism in chapter 1 of this dissertation, for instance, one may get the impression that superficial, terminological agreement (they all use the word 'idea' a lot) is masking fundamental disagreement. I suspect this is the case, but insofar as the ideists were seen in their own time, by writers like Sergeant

and Stillingfleet, as an identifiable school of philosophers, it is useful to have a label for them.

The term '**phenomenalism**' is used to refer to the view that bodies and/or the qualities of bodies owe their existence and nature to their being perceived or conceived by finite minds such as ourselves. Note that on this usage analytic or subjunctive phenomenalism, the view that statements about bodies are equivalent in meaning to certain long conjunctions of subjunctive conditionals about the perceptions of minds, is only one possible version of phenomenalism.

Finally, I use the term '**immaterialism**,' as Berkeley does, *not* for the denial of matter, but rather as a name for Berkeley's total metaphysical system. Immaterialism is thus a particular form of phenomenalistic idealism.

Chapter 1

The Theory of Meanings

In order, Berkeley says,

to give a farther account how words came to produce the doctrine of abstract ideas, it must be observed that it is a received opinion that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas, and that every significant name stands for an idea ([PHK](#), Intro §19).

This is the view Berkeley seeks to refute.

Here as elsewhere, commentators have typically assumed that Berkeley's primary or only target is Locke.¹ I will argue, however, that Berkeley intends his criticism to be of much wider application. Indeed, Berkeley's criticisms strike at the heart of an entire tradition of theorizing about language which stretches back to Plato and Aristotle. I will refer to the common core of this tradition as 'the Theory of Meanings' (capitalized), because it involves the postulation of a special class of entities which I will call 'meanings.'

In this chapter, I will begin by explaining, in a general way, what is involved in the Theory of Meanings. After this, I will explore in some detail three different theories of meanings found in works which would have been familiar to Berkeley. The works

1. George Pappas affirms that Berkeley had targets other than Locke in mind – he identifies the Scholastics and Malebranche, among others – but his discussion is nonetheless firmly focused on Locke (Pappas 2000, 23, 31-32, 71-79). Other commentators do not mention the possibility of other targets at all (see, e.g., Atherton 1987; Winkler 1989, chs. 1-2; Stoneham 2002, ch. 7). However, Martha Brandt Bolton does emphasize the wider range of targets Berkeley has in mind (Bolton 1987, 63-66), and Julius Weinberg places Berkeley's attack in the context of the Scholastic background (Weinberg 1965, 5-13).

to be discussed are the Port-Royal *Logic*, John Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy*, and, of course, Locke's *Essay*. These works span the full range of 17th century philosophy, representing Cartesianism, Aristotelianism, and modern empiricism, respectively. In the next chapter, I will develop an interpretation of the arguments in the Introduction to the *Principles* which shows that Berkeley's aim is not to refute some particular theory of the nature of meanings, but rather to refute the Theory of Meanings as a whole. Thus I will show that Berkeley's critique applies to all of the theories discussed in this chapter, and also to earlier theories, such as Aristotle's, and later theories, such as Frege's.

1.1 Overview of the Theory

The Theory of Meanings is an answer to the question, what does it take for a word to be meaningful? The answer that it gives is a rather straightforward and intuitive one: for a word to be meaningful is for that word to have a meaning. A 'meaning' is here understood as a special sort of entity with which the word in question has a merely conventional association.

In typical cases, a meaningful word is *about* some (actual or merely possible) things in the world. To understand the word 'apple' is to grasp the meaning of that word, and to grasp the meaning of that word is to *think about apples*. If, however, the Theory of Meanings is not just to push the problem of meaningfulness one step back, by raising the question of how our thoughts get to be about things, then the connections between the meanings and the objects in the world must *not* be a matter of convention (see Figure 1.1). Thus, for instance, Aristotle holds that "spoken sounds are symbols of affections of the soul" and, that although the sounds, being merely conventional, vary from one culture to another, the affections of the soul are universally the same (Aristotle *De Int.* 1 16a4-7). The affections of the soul are intrinsically, by their very nature, *about* things in

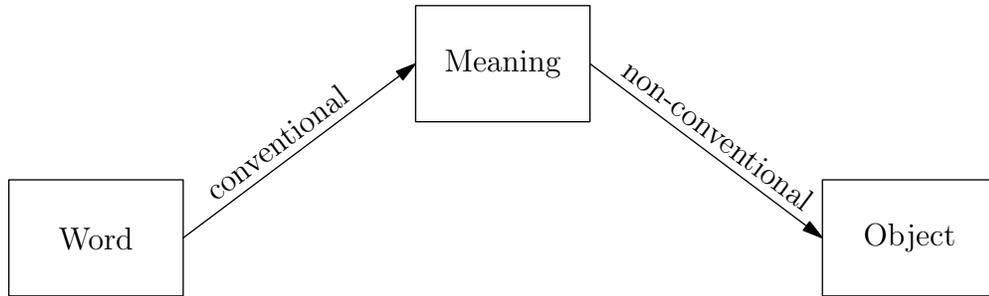


Figure 1.1: The Theory of Meanings

the world, but words get to be about things in the world only in virtue of their conventional connection to affections of the soul. Similarly, it is Frege's view that it is merely a matter of convention that a particular word is associated with a particular 'sense,' but it is the very nature of that sense to pick out the objects it does (Frege [1892] 1960).

On this kind of model, successful communication, which is taken to be the central purpose of language, occurs when a speaker uses her familiarity with the linguistic conventions to 'translate' the meanings she has in mind into a sequence of spoken or written signs which the hearer, being familiar with the same conventions, can then translate back into the meanings, so that the hearer comes to have the same meanings as the speaker. Thus, for instance, if the meanings are taken to be ideas (as on the theories of the Port-Royalists and Locke), we may suppose that I am thinking of apples, and my thinking of apples is constituted by my (occurrently) having an apple idea. In virtue of my familiarity with English, I know that the word associated with that idea is 'apple.' I can now utter that word and you, being likewise familiar with the conventions, will thereby come to have the same idea I have.

It should be clear that the establishment of such conventions requires that speakers have a prior grasp of the meanings in question: language learning, on this kind of picture, involves first having a separate grasp of the words (considered as mere sounds) and

the meanings, and then learning to associate them with one another. Thus a corollary of the Theory of Meanings is that the introduction of language cannot expand the representative power of thought, since we cannot talk about things in the absence of a prior ability to think about them.²

The central thesis of the Theory of Meanings is, then, that a word gets to be meaningful by its conventional association with a special entity, its *meaning*, which in turn is non-conventionally related to some (possible) objects in the world. Associated with this view is a picture of language learning and communication which takes mental representation to be prior to and independent of linguistic representation, while linguistic representation is taken to be parasitic on mental representation. Furthermore, this sort of representation and cognitive communication is taken to be the central purpose of language.

1.2 The Port-Royalists

The Port-Royal *Logic* provided one of the most influential treatments of language in the early modern period. The account of language advocated there is a paradigmatic version of the Theory of Meanings.

The *Logic*, along with its companion piece, the Port-Royal *Grammar*, was composed at Port-Royal Abbey in France in the middle of the 17th century. The *Grammar* was first published in 1660 and the *Logic* in 1662. The primary originator of the theory put forth in these books seems to have been Antoine Arnauld, though his collaborators, Claude Lancelot for the *Grammar* and Pierre Nicole for the *Logic*, were intellectual giants in

2. Cf. Ayers 1991, 1:301: “For all but a few, in Locke’s time as before, the structure of thought is the source of the structure of language.”

their own right I shall refer to Arnauld, Lancelot, and Nicole collectively as ‘the Port-Royalists.’

According to the *Logic*, “we can generally say that words are distinct and articulated sounds that people have made into signs to indicate what takes place in the mind” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 74). The Port-Royalists hold that there are four basic mental operations: conceiving, judging, reasoning, and ordering.³ They call the things operated on ‘ideas’ (Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, 65-68; Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 23). These operations give structure to our thought, and this structure is prior to language. Following Aristotle and Aquinas, the Port-Royalists hold that linguistic conventions consist only in the linking of ‘articulated sounds’ with universal and non-conventional ideas and mental operations (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 28; see Buroker 1993, 463-464).⁴

The signification (meaning) of a word, according to the Port-Royalists, must be something that “takes place in the mind.” They hold that “for an uttered or written sound to signify is nothing other than to prompt an idea connected to this sound in the mind by striking our ears or eyes” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 66). The theory, then, is that, in successful verbal communication, the speaker uses conventional rules to translate what is taking place in her mind into words, and, as a result of these words, the same thing subsequently takes place in the mind of the hearer.

Although the Port-Royalists sometimes assert that the meanings of words must be ideas (26, 66), the more general formulation, that words signify “what takes place in the

3. This list was inherited from the Medieval logicians. For a general treatment of the reception of these Medieval doctrines in the 17th and 18th centuries, see Nuchelmans 1983. Nuchelmans devotes his fourth chapter to the Port-Royal *Logic*. On the Port-Royalists’ treatment of the four operations, also see Buroker 1993, 456-458.

4. This view is explicitly associated with Aristotle and Aquinas in Arnauld (1684) 1775–1783, 585-586. These themes were further developed in Scholastic sources with which the figures under discussion here would have been familiar. For a brief summary, see Ashworth (1984) 1998, 185-187.

mind,” expresses their considered view, since they endorse “a most general distinction among words into those that signify the objects of thoughts and those that signify the form and the manner or mode of our thoughts” (Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, 67-68; also see p. 122). The word ‘idea’ strictly speaking applies to the object or content of thought, whereas the manner of thought is better called a ‘perception.’ However, as we shall see below, it is Arnauld’s view that this distinction is purely semantic; metaphysically speaking the idea and the perception are identical. Nevertheless, this distinction is crucial to the Port-Royal semantic theory, since it is the basis for the distinction between verbs, on the one hand, and nouns and adjectives on the other (Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, 122; Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 74, 78; for discussion, see Nuchelmans 1983, §4.3).

The most important operation (‘manner or mode’) of thought is *judging*, which the Port-Royalists define as “the action in which the mind, bringing together different ideas, affirms of one that it is the other, or denies of one that it is the other” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 23). ‘Judging’ is thus used as a general term, encompassing both affirmation and denial (82). Every indicative verb signifies affirmation; the copula signifies simple affirmation whereas other indicative verbs signify the affirmation of some particular predicate.⁵ Thus, for instance, the Latin verb ‘vivit’ signifies the affirmation of living (79). That is, in the sentence ‘Petrus vivit,’ the noun signifies the idea of Peter and the verb signifies the mental action of affirming the idea of living, so that the speaker intends for the hearer to affirm the idea of living of the idea of Peter. This is brought out more clearly in the paraphrase ‘Petrus vivens est’:⁶ in this example, ‘Petrus’ signifies

5. The signification of verbs in other moods is discussed in the *Grammar* (Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, 136-138), which also contains a discussion of the mental acts signified by conjunctions and interjections (168-169).

6. On this sort of paraphrase, see Aristotle *Met.*, Δ 7 1017a27-30; Arnauld and Nicole (1662) 1996, 79.

the idea of Peter, ‘vivens’ signifies the idea of living, and ‘est’ signifies the mental action of affirmation which is to be performed on the preceding two ideas.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the expressive power of speech is, according to this theory, in principle coextensive with the expressive power of thought prior to the introduction of speech (see Buroker 1993, 457). We represent the world to ourselves in thought by performing certain mental operations, primarily affirmation and denial, on our ideas. Words can, by convention, be made to stand for any of these ideas and operations, and this is the *only* way in which words can be meaningful (Arnauld [1684] 1775–1783, 585-586; see Nadler 1989, 173-174). The expressive power of both speech and thought will therefore depend on what ideas we have and what operations we can perform.

With these considerations in mind, the Port-Royalists adamantly reject imagism. Ideas, for the Port-Royalists, are conceptions in the intellect and not merely “images formed in the brain” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 25-26; cf. CSM, 2:113), that is, they correspond to what in Scholastic jargon were called ‘notions,’ in contrast to ‘phantasms.’ These intellectual conceptions extend far beyond the possible objects of sensation or imagination, and do not originate from the senses, though they may be prompted by sensory input (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 28-30; cf. CSM, 1:303-305). A particularly important way in which the intellect is able to extend its ideas beyond what can be represented by mere images is *abstraction*. Abstraction is characterized by the Port-Royalists as a process whereby we separate in thought what cannot be separated in nature (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 37-38). So, for instance, there cannot really be “lines without width or surfaces without depth” in the world – not even in the corporeal imagination – yet geometers succeed in forming ideas of just such things. This is done

by means of selective attention: they “consider the length without paying attention to the width” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 38).

The foregoing account is well-supported by the *Logic* and the *Grammar*. However, a complication is introduced by the theory of ideas Arnauld endorses in his famous controversy with Malebranche. According to many scholars, in that context Arnauld defends a version of direct realism (Cook 1974; Yolton 1975; Nadler 1989). Direct realism, however, just is the denial of the claim that some entity such as an idea, phantasm, or notion stands between the perceiver and the external object perceived (Nadler 1989, 11-13). The Port-Royal theory relies crucially on a distinction between mental acts or operations, i.e. manners or modes of perceiving, and the mental objects (ideas) operated on or perceived. In the debate with Malebranche, however, Arnauld appears to treat ideas as identical to acts of perception, and so collapses this critical distinction. It will be worthwhile, therefore, briefly to examine the consistency of the theory of mental representation found in the *Logic* and the *Grammar* with the theory found in Arnauld’s *On True and False Ideas* (Arnauld [1683] 1990).

On True and False Ideas aims to refute Malebranche’s theory of ideas as ‘representative beings,’ i.e. as entities “actually distinct from our mind as well as from the [external] object” (63) by perception of which we (indirectly) perceive external objects. The book opens with a list of seven methodological rules which Arnauld says our inquiry ought to follow. The first and third of these are of special interest here:

The first [rule] is to begin with those things that are clearest and simplest, and which cannot be doubted, provided one pays attention to them. . . . The third is not to seek reasons *ad infinitum*, but to stop when we get to what we know to be the nature of a thing, or what we know with certainty to be a quality of it. One must not ask why extension is divisible, for example, or

why the mind is capable of thought, for it is the nature of extension to be divisible, and that of the mind to think (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 50).

Arnauld then applies these rules in a brief exposition of his own theory of ideas before launching into his critique of Malebranche. He begins by reciting Descartes's *cogito* argument to show that I exist and that it is my nature to think. He then asserts that "just as it is clear that *I think*, it is also clear that I think of something, i.e. that I know and perceive something. For that is what thought is essentially" (53). Arnauld's view is that the *essence* or *nature* of thought is to represent (Nadler 1989, 126-127, 177-178). According to Arnauld's third rule, when we have identified the nature of a thing, we have reached the point where explanation comes to an end: the mind thinks because its nature is to think, and thoughts represent because it is their nature to represent, and this is as far as explanation can, or should, go. Thus, for Arnauld, the representative capacity of thought must be taken as *primitive* (cf. 174).

Arnauld next produces an argument for the conclusion that ideas are modes of the mind (and not Platonic objects, as Malebranche thought). He writes,

true modifications cannot be conceived without conceiving of the substance of which they are the modifications; so if it is my nature to think, and I can think of different things without changing my nature then these different thoughts can only be different modifications of the thinking which constitutes my nature (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 53).

Arnauld connects his view with Descartes' definition of an idea as "that form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought" (CSM, 2:113). Arnauld glosses this as the claim that the idea "is not really distinct from our thought or perception, but is rather our thought itself insofar as it contains *objectively* what is formally in the object" (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 72-73). In other words, what idea

I am having is just a matter of what sort of perceptual act I am performing. Arnauld (and, on Arnauld's interpretation, Descartes) can thus be seen as what we should nowadays call an *adverbialist*: he holds that to have a particular idea is to perceive or think in a certain manner. For instance, to have the idea of red is to perceive redly.⁷

In Arnauld's view, when I perceive (or imagine, or think of) something red, and thus may be truly said to have (occurently) an idea of red, what is happening is that my soul undergoes a certain modification, the modification I have just called 'perceiving redly'. This modification just is a single mental state, and which sort of state it is is entirely a matter of its intrinsic nature; it does not depend on a relation to another mental state, a Platonic entity, or a concrete object to get its nature. This is what I mean by the attribution of adverbialism to Arnauld. However, if this is to be an account of mental representation, it must be the case that agents who exemplify such a mental state are (at least sometimes) thereby related to objects in the world. This relation Arnauld takes as primitive. It is entirely in virtue of the intrinsic nature of my mental act that I count as perceiving red; no object distinct from that act plays any role in constituting its content (cf. Nuchelmans 1983, 72).

Both of these things must happen in all thought: there must be a soul which is the subject of the modification, and the modification must be representative in nature (must have some content). To speak of perceiving and to speak of having ideas are two different ways of describing this situation. 'Perception' and 'idea,' Arnauld says, refer to "a single modification of our soul which necessarily contains [two] relations:" it is related to the soul which perceives, and to the object which is perceived. The use of 'perception' emphasizes the former relation, and the use of 'idea' emphasizes the latter,

7. Arnauld's interpretation of Descartes is defend by Nuchelmans 1983, §2.1 and Nadler 1989, §15.

but both words refer the same modification (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 66; cf. Cook 1974, 55-56).

Arnauld describes the difference in meaning between ‘perception’ and ‘idea’ as a difference in the ‘most direct’ meaning or reference of the words (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 66). In the context of the Port-Royal semantic theory, this should probably be understood in terms of the theory of ‘incidental ideas.’ Incidental ideas are ideas associated with a word or phrase in the mind of the speaker or the hearer which are not part of the “principal meaning of [the] expression” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 66). These incidental ideas are of three types. The first type consists of ideas which, although not part of the ‘principal meaning’ are nevertheless associated with the word by ‘common use.’ Thus the Port-Royalists say that the ‘principal meaning’ of the phrase ‘you lied about it’ is “‘you know that the contrary of what you say is true.’ But in common use these words carry an additional idea of contempt and outrage” (66-67). The second type are those which are idiosyncratic to a particular usage of the word on a particular occasion. These ideas, we are told, are “prompted by the speaker’s tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, and other natural signs” (67). The third type of incidental idea is rather more complicated. These incidental ideas, the Port-Royalists say, are those “the mind adds to the precise meaning of terms, for a specific reason. This often happens when, after it conceives the precise meaning connected to the word, it does not stop there when this meaning is too confused and general” (70). The star examples here are demonstrative pronouns, and highly general nouns like ‘thing.’ In these cases, the context usually determines some *particular* thing as the referent of the word or phrase, and so the mind proceeds to think about the features of the thing referred to, in order to conceive it more clearly, although none of these attributes is, strictly speaking, signified by the word used.

Arnauld says that “the *perception* of a square has as its most direct meaning my soul perceiving the square, whereas the *idea* of a square has as its most direct meaning the square in so far as it is *objectively* in my mind” (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 66). This can be taken in each case as the ‘principal meaning’ mentioned in the *Logic* (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 66). The idea of perception and the idea of idea are thus both, according to the definitions in the *Logic*, ideas of modified things (30-31): when we speak of perceptions, we consider a mind *as perceiving*, and when we speak of ideas, we consider an object *as perceived*. Now both of these complex ideas contain the idea of a particular mode of the mind, and, as Arnauld tells us in this very passage, that mode “necessarily contains both of these relations” (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 66) – that is, an act of perceiving must be some mind’s act, and it must be *of* something (though the thing that it is of need not be present or even exist). Since the act of perception always involves a subject and an object, it is natural to pass from the subject-as-perceiving to the object of perception, or from the object-as-perceived to the subject of perception, so that the idea of the object can be taken as one of the incidental ideas attached to ‘perception,’ and the idea of the subject can be taken as one of the incidental ideas attached to ‘idea.’ These can be regarded as incidental ideas of the third type, those which are frequently added simply because they are readily available and allow a more distinct cognition.

Strictly speaking, we should thus say that the common thing signified by ‘perception’ and ‘idea’ is a perceptual *event*, which consists of a mind perceiving an object. A perception is always *someone perceiving*, and an idea is always *something being perceived*. Neither word, strictly speaking, refers to the act of perceiving alone⁸ – rather,

8. Contrary to Cook 1974, 55-56.

‘perception’ refers primarily to the mind-as-perceiving, and ‘idea’ to the external object-as-perceived (although this object need not actually exist). The *primary* or *most immediate* significations of the two terms overlap (both include the perceptual event), and what the *Logic* calls their ‘entire meanings,’ “the entire impressions [they make] in the mind” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 66), coincide. The ‘entire meaning’ is the complete perceptual event, including subject, act, and object.

This theory of Arnauld’s is supposed, as we have already seen, to be an elaboration on Descartes’s statement that an idea is a form of thought. Earlier, I argued that, given how Arnauld understands this statement, he should be classified as having an adverbial theory of mental contents, that is, as taking the different contents perceptions can have as being characteristics of the perceptual act. However, Arnauld’s emphasis on the connection between the idea and the external object – defining ‘the idea of a square’ as “the square in so far as it is *objectively* in my mind” (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 66) – muddies the waters somewhat. Fortunately, not long after his discussion of the meanings of ‘idea’ and ‘perception,’ Arnauld offers a clarification of this issue:

We must not confuse *the idea of an object* with *that object conceived*, at least as long as one does not add ‘insofar as it is objectively in the mind’. For *being conceived, in regard to the sun that is in the sky*, is only an extrinsic denomination, i.e. only a relation to the perception which I have of it (67).

The *Logic* defines an ‘extrinsic denomination’ as a mode “taken from something that is not in the substance, such as ‘loved,’ ‘seen,’ ‘desired,’ names derived from the actions of something else” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 32). To say that being perceived is a purely extrinsic denomination of the sun that is in the sky is to say that the change from being perceived to not being perceived does not require any change in the intrinsic features of the sun. Whether I perceive the sun or not is *entirely* a matter of the intrinsic

features of my mind (cf. Nadler 1989, 126-127, 146, 167-168, 177-178). This is also the reason why it is possible to perceive an object which does not exist: being perceived does not require having any intrinsic features.

This distinction between ideas and perception lacks metaphysical depth – the words ‘idea’ and ‘perception,’ in the end, provide two different ways of talking about the same worldly states of affairs. Nevertheless, the distinction *is* sufficient for the uses to which it is put in the Port-Royal semantic theory. That theory, essentially, connects nouns with ideas and verbs with perceptions. Although, metaphysically speaking, all that is going on in either case is minds thinking, nouns instruct us to consider external objects-as-perceived,⁹ whereas verbs tell us *how* to consider them. Thus in our example ‘Petrus vivit,’ we are instructed to consider Peter, an external object, and living, a way external objects can be, and to put them together in thought in a particular way, considering Peter *as* living. To say that I *affirm* living of Peter is to say that I think of Peter and living together in a particular manner, and this manner of thinking is, in Arnauld’s usage, one of the varieties of perception. The instruction to consider an object in a particular way, or to put multiple objects together in thought in a particular way, is the distinguishing feature of verbs.

We can summarize Arnauld’s theory of mental representation as follows. In every perceptual event, there is involved a particular act of perception, which is a modification of some mind. This modification must be of a particular sort, or, as Descartes might put it, it must have a particular form. It is regarding this form that Arnauld is a primitivist: he holds that it is the nature of a given perceptual act to have a certain content and no more can be said about the matter. Certainly no reductive analysis of what it is for a perceptual act to have this or that content can be given; it is simply a brute fact that such

9. Here the ‘-as-perceived’ is essentially redundant, for we can only consider objects insofar as we perceive them. This does not mean that I must attend to the fact that the object is perceived by me.

an act of perception has such a content. A perception is of an external object when that object matches the content.

Is this a form of direct realism? On the one hand, Arnauld's theory does not recognize the existence of a mental entity, distinct from the act of perception, which is the immediate or direct object of perception. On the other hand, the theory does hold that perceiving an object involves having a mental 'copy' of that object. The object is 'copied' into the very nature of the act of perceiving. Whether this should be called 'direct realism' is largely a terminological matter.¹⁰

What is important for present purposes is that Arnauld's theory of mental representation does not require a reevaluation of our earlier account of the Port-Royal theory of language. Recall that, at the most general level, the Port-Royal theory of language says that, prior to the introduction of language, we have certain ideas, and we can perform certain operations on these ideas, by which complicated structures of thought can be constructed. The role of linguistic conventions is to attach arbitrary signs to our ideas and the more complex structures formed out of them. Arnauld's theory of mental representation adds the further claim that ideas are not mental objects distinct from our mental acts, but simply mental acts considered in terms of their representational content. In (mentally) affirming that Peter lives, I perform three mental acts: I conceive Peter-ly, I conceive living-ly, and I then use these two acts of conception as components in an act

10. For an illuminating discussion of the definition of 'direct realism' as applied to the interpretation of Arnauld, see Hoffman [2002](#).

of affirmation.¹¹ The Latin sentence ‘*Petrus vivit*’ is a recipe for the construction of this complex mental state. The mental state is the meaning of the sentence.

1.3 Locke

Although Noam Chomsky dubbed the Port-Royal program ‘Cartesian Linguistics’ (Chomsky 2009), there is in fact nothing distinctively Cartesian or rationalist about the Port-Royalists’ theory of language. Their approach to the philosophy of language is the Theory of Meanings, which they inherited from Aristotle: words are linked by convention to pre-existing mental contents, and the aim of uttering words is that the hearer might come to have the same mental contents as the speaker. The distinctively Cartesian elements of the theory are to be found only in the nature and origin of the mental contents in question. Chomsky seems to think that what is ‘Cartesian’ about the theory is its assumption of a universal structure of thought which is reflected in the structure of language (78). There is, however, nothing distinctively Cartesian or rationalist about this view. It was, as we have seen, endorsed by Aristotle. Furthermore, as we shall now see, the central elements of the Port-Royal theory were also endorsed by John Locke.

Locke’s endorsement of the Theory of Meanings is evident in the very structure of the *Essay*: after dispensing, in Book I, with the doctrine of innate ideas, Locke moves on, in Book II, to give an account of the ideas we do have, where they come from, and how we represent the world to ourselves by means of them. Only after this do we

11. The complex mental action can be represented using function notation as AFFIRM(CONCEIVE(Peter), CONCEIVE(Living)). Note that although the act of affirmation takes as input two acts of conceiving, it is not *about* those acts. Rather, it is about their objects. If I want to affirm, for instance, that my conception of a triangle is clear, then the act I must perform is AFFIRM(CONCEIVE(CONCEIVE(triangle)), CONCEIVE(clarity)). This notation is slightly misleading insofar as it suggests that in conceiving I somehow operate on the external object, which in Arnauld’s view is not the case. However, this misleading way of speaking seems unavoidable, since we have no way of picking out any particular idea other than by saying what it is of.

arrive at Book III, ‘Of Words.’ This organization presupposes, with the Port-Royalists, that the full range of expressive power is available in a sort of non-conventional ‘mental language’ prior to the introduction of words.¹² Berkeley’s rejection of this picture is very probably the reason for his remark that Book III of Locke’s *Essay* ought, by rights, to have come first (N, §717; see Atherton 2007, 284-285; Brykman 2010, 407).

According to Locke, the use of language requires the ability “to frame articulate Sounds,” and “to make [these sounds] stand as marks for the *Ideas* within [one’s] own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men’s Minds be conveyed from one to another” (EHU, §§3.1.1-2; cf. LW, 4:413, 9:249). This is again an endorsement of the Theory of Meanings.

Like the Port-Royalists, Locke usually says that all meaningful words stand for ideas, but when he is speaking more carefully he carves out an exception for those words he calls ‘particles’ (EHU, §3.7; cf. Ayers 1991, 1:22-23). These particles signify ways in which the mind puts its ideas together. The star examples are ‘is,’ which signifies affirmation, and ‘is not,’ which signifies negation (EHU, §3.7.1). Lacking the Port-Royalists’ interest in linguistics, Locke does not discuss what goes on in sentences

12. On ‘mental language’ in Locke and the preceding tradition, see Ashworth (1984) 1998, 185-188.

lacking an explicit copula, or give any kind of account of complex sentences. His remarks on language are, indeed, more a gesture in the direction of a theory than an actual theory.¹³ The theory at which he is gesturing could easily be that of Port-Royal.¹⁴

Locke's theory of mental representation is likewise structurally similar to the Port-Royal theory: "the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks" is termed an 'idea' (EHU, §1.1.8; cf. LW, 4:130-131) and thinking is said to consist in the exercise of various faculties, assumed to be common to all human beings, which operate in one way or another on ideas (EHU, §§2.9-11).

Locke does, however, differ importantly from the Port-Royalists on the question of the nature and origin of our ideas. Locke, of course, rejects innate ideas and holds that all ideas originate from either sensation or reflection. The question of the nature of these ideas, for Locke, is vexed. Locke explicitly runs together items the Scholastics and Port-Royalists had so carefully distinguished, saying that he "used [the word 'idea'] to express whatever is meant by *Phantasm*, *Notion*, *Species*, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking" (§1.1.8). The suggestion here that notions (i.e. intellectual conceptions) cannot, or at least need not, be distinguished from phantasms, could be taken to imply an imagistic conception of ideas: that is, since we clearly *do* have mental images, the suggestion that all of the objects "the Mind can be employ'd

13. Thus I disagree with Ian Tipton's remark that "whereas Locke has a very genuine interest in language, Berkeley's concern with language, though in its way no less genuine, is always subservient to his interest in problems which are not *essentially* problems about words" (Tipton 1974, 141). There is not, I think, any contrast between Locke and Berkeley here. Both Locke and Berkeley have a great deal to say about language, but in both cases the ultimate aim is to solve certain problems in metaphysics and epistemology. Furthermore, in both cases the attention to metaphysics and epistemology is in turn motivated by religious concerns. (Berkeley's religious concerns are indicated on the title pages of nearly every work he wrote; on the importance of religion, and especially the politics of religion, to the project of Locke's *Essay*, see Rogers 1994; Jolley 1999, 10-12, 16-17.) This attitude is shared not only by Locke and Berkeley, but by most philosophers in the period; indeed, insofar as the Port-Royalists differ, it is probably only due to the involvement of Claude Lancelot who was really a grammarian and not a philosopher or theologian.

14. On the influence of the Port-Royal *Logic* on Locke, see Yolton 1975, 146, 153; Schaar 2008, 328-329, 332.

about in thinking” are of the same kind could be taken to imply that they are all images (cf. Ayers 1991, 1:45-48).¹⁵ Locke’s use of a visual perception “in a thick mist” as an example of an ‘obscure and confused’ idea in his second letter to Stillingfleet reinforces this impression (LW, 4:221-222).¹⁶ I will argue that this initial impression is ultimately correct: Locke is indeed an imagist.

In order to evaluate the attribution of imagism to Locke, we must distinguish between two different views which might be called ‘imagism.’ The first view is the *resemblance thesis*, according to which at least some of our ideas literally resemble their objects, in much the same way a photograph resembles its subject. This was how ‘phantasms’ were understood in the 17th century, and Descartes seems still to think of the images in the corporeal imagination in roughly this way, though he emphasizes that they do not resemble their objects in all respects (CSM, 1:165-166; Ayers 1991, 1:27). It is thus likely that those 17th philosophers, such as Hobbes and Gassendi, who believed only in phantasms endorsed the resemblance thesis (Hobbes [1651] 1985, chs. 1-2; CSM, 2:186-191; cf. Lennon 1988, 234-236; Ayers 1991, 1:45-49; Jacovides 1999, 471-473).

The second view which might be called ‘imagism,’ is *sensationalism*. This is the view, explicitly endorsed by both Hobbes and Hume, that “there is no conception in a mans mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs

15. Marc Hight draws a different moral: according to Hight, this passage supports the claim that “Locke uses the term ‘idea’ as a genus that covers a wealth of species” (Hight 2008, 100). Now, it was not without reason that Peter Browne complained that Locke’s philosophy (and that of Locke’s fellow ideists) amounted to no more than “the talking of Idea’s, and running endless divisions upon them” (Browne 1697, 3); a large part of Locke’s *Essay* is engaged in constructing a complex taxonomy of ideas. However, Locke nowhere indicates that phantasms, notions, or species are different varieties of ideas. Locke’s ‘endless divisions,’ in other words, do not line up with the established taxonomies in either Scholastic or Cartesian theory.

16. Later, however, Locke says that talk of ideas as obscure and confused is a *metaphor* drawn from vision (LW, 4:242).

of Sense” (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 85), or, as Hume puts it, that “all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones” (Enq, §2.5). What Hobbes and Hume affirm, specifically, is that all of our ideas are copied from the senses. Of course, like Locke, they hold that the mind can operate on these ideas in various ways, to recombine them and so forth. What I am interested in, and what I will mean by ‘sensationalism,’ is the somewhat weaker thesis that all of our ideas are *of the same sort* as (inner and outer) sensations. This is clearly an important feature of the views of Hobbes and Hume, for they both hold that non-sensory ideas are exactly like sensory ideas, only ‘more feeble.’

It should be noted that these two doctrines are logically independent. On the one hand, if sensations do not resemble objects, then ideas copied from sensations will not resemble them either. On the other hand, one might think that we come to have photographic likenesses by some means other than sense. Finally, however, the two views clearly can be held together.

Locke’s claim that primary quality ideas resemble their objects appears to commit him to the resemblance thesis, and his empiricism appears to commit him to sensationalism. Thus, on the most straightforward reading of Locke, he is an imagist in both senses (cf. Jacovides 1999). Nevertheless, many scholars have resisted the attribution of one or both sorts of imagism to Locke.

Interpreters who reject the attribution of the resemblance thesis to Locke generally do so on grounds that the inherent philosophical absurdity of the view is too great for it to be attributed with any plausibility to a thinker of Locke’s stature (Bennett 1971, 106; Curley 1972, 450-452). Those who reject the attribution of sensationalism to Locke generally do so on grounds that it cannot account for all of the ideas which we have, and which Locke acknowledges that we have.

One of the reasons the resemblance thesis seemed plausible to Hobbes and Gassendi was likely their materialism (or, in Gassendi's case, at least materialist leanings) in the philosophy of mind (Ayers 1991, 1:45-49). If the mind is a physical thing, then there is no reason (prior to empirical neuroscience) why the mental representation of a square should not somehow involve a square-shaped region of the mind. Furthermore, on a simple type-identity theory like Hobbes', there is no reason why the retinal image – which is, indeed, very much like a photograph – cannot be identified with visual sensation.¹⁷

Locke, however, was not a reductive materialist of this sort. Even in his notorious discussion of thinking matter (EHU, §4.3.6), Locke gets only as far as considering property dualism; he does not seriously consider full-blown reductive materialism of the sort propounded by Hobbes (Jolley 1999, ch. 5).¹⁸ If, however, mental properties are wholly distinct from physical properties, then it is quite unclear how there could be anything like a 'photographic resemblance' between them.¹⁹

As a result of this obvious difficulty, scholars have exercised considerable ingenuity in trying to reinterpret Locke's claims about resemblance to avoid commitment to the thesis that any ideas literally resemble their objects (Bennett 1971, 106-111; Curley 1972, 452-454; Campbell [1980] 1998; McCann 2011, 176-179). My own suspicion is that these attempts are entirely *too* ingenious, and that Locke in fact meant what he

17. Of course, secondary quality sensations cannot involve resemblances of this sort if nothing but matter in motion exists in the world. These sensations are therefore identified by Hobbes with 'divers motions' in the brain (Hobbes [1651] 1985, 86).

18. Michael Jacovides argues, on the basis of remarks in Locke's dispute with John Norris, that Locke was in fact agnostic about whether ideas were corporeal (Jacovides 1999, 473-474). Even if Jacovides is correct, it does not follow from this that properties like *perceiving a red circle* or *being in pain* are fully materialistically reducible; a materialistic reduction is contemplated only for the (internal, immediate) *object* of thought. This sort of position would indeed make the resemblance thesis rather more palatable.

19. Gassendi appealed to these sorts of concerns against Descartes (CSM, 2:234). Interestingly, Locke seems to be raising a similar worry against Malebranche at LW, 9:219. For discussion, see Jacovides 1999, 478-479.

said: that the idea of squareness, a mental thing, is similar to squareness, a mode of an external material object. In fact, as Michael Jacovides points out, Locke twice asserts explicitly that the very same geometrical property is possessed by an idea and a physical object (EHU, §§2.8.18, 4.4.6; Jacovides 1999, 475).

Sensationalism is, *prima facie*, even more strongly supported by an even more central aspect of Locke's philosophy, namely, his empiricism. Locke is quite insistent that all our ideas must originate from either sensation or reflection (EHU, §§2.1.1-5), and it is a short step from there to the conclusion that all ideas are copies of inner or outer sensations. However, Locke has given those who wish to avoid attributing sensationalism to him considerably more resources to work with than those who wish to avoid attributing the resemblance thesis. This is because, as has already been observed, Locke follows the Port-Royalists in attributing to the mind the ability to perform a variety of *operations* on our ideas. At least some of these operations *produce new ideas*. It is therefore not implausible to hold that some of the ideas produced in this fashion are unlike sensations. Indeed, it is difficult to see how highly abstract ideas, or relational ideas, for instance, could possibly be like sensations. However, again, Locke's apparent assimilation of notions into phantasms, combined with the intellectual background of Hobbes and Gassendi, provides good reason for regarding Locke as a sensationalist, despite the philosophical problems this leads him into (Ayers 1991, 1:44-66).

In sum, it is quite likely that the simplistic interpretation of Locke, on which he is an imagist in both senses, is correct: Locke holds both that some ideas resemble the external objects they represent, and that all ideas are of the same sort as the impressions of inner and outer sense. Neither version of imagism, however, answers the question of *how* ideas represent. From the fact that (some) ideas resemble what they represent, it does not follow that they represent *by* resembling. In fact, Locke seems to suggest just the

opposite. Prior to introducing the primary/secondary quality distinction, Locke defines a ‘quality’ as “the Power to produce any *Idea* in our mind,” and one of the examples of such a power he gives is roundness, a primary quality (EHU, §2.8.8).²⁰ The primary qualities are, it seems, powers to produce ideas resembling the powers that produce them, while secondary qualities are powers to produce ideas that do not resemble the powers that produce them. This is further supported by Locke’s discussion of the reality of simple ideas, where he says that the reality (i.e. veridicality) of simple ideas lies “in that steady correspondence, they have with the distinct Constitutions of real Beings” and this, he explicitly says, is the case “whether [the ideas] be only constant Effects, or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves” (§2.30.2). In other words, both primary and secondary quality ideas are ‘real’ because they are “constantly produced” by the same real constitutions, which they represent.²¹

In this text, Locke slides back and forth between speaking of ideas as ‘corresponding to’ or ‘representing’ *powers*, *qualities*, and *constitutions*. As we have seen, the powers and qualities are one and the same thing (though not all powers are qualities). The constitution of an object is, however, something else: it is the unknown ‘real essence’ which grounds the powers of an object (§3.6.6).²² Now it seems that Locke sometimes, as in §2.30.2, fails to distinguish powers or qualities from the constitutions which give

20. Also see EHU, §§2.8.9 (eds. 1-3), 2.8.18. On the changes to §§2.8.9-10 in the fourth edition, see McCann 2011, 167ff.

21. EHU, §2.30.2, and the causal theory of representation suggested by it, will be examined in more detail in §2.3, below.

22. Strictly speaking, the real essence is the constitution which is had in common by all of the objects which we group, on the basis of their shared qualities, into a sort and which grounds those shared qualities. Thus ‘real essence’ and ‘constitution’ are not strictly speaking synonyms, since it makes sense to talk about the constitution of an *individual*, whereas it makes sense to talk about a real essence only in connection with a *sort*. This complication can be ignored harmlessly in the present context.

rise to them. Recognizing this ambiguity can help to solve three problems which arise when one takes Locke's definition of qualities as powers seriously.²³

The first problem is that it is quite difficult to see how a categorical property, such as phenomenal squareness, could resemble a power. If what is meant here is not the power itself, but rather the ground of the power in the object's constitution, then the matter is less difficult, since the latter is presumably a categorical property.

The second problem is that, although Locke denies that we can have genuine *knowledge* of the constitutions of objects, he regards the corpuscular hypothesis as preeminently intelligible, and even likely to be true (EHU, §4.3.16). However, according to the corpuscular hypothesis, the perceived qualities of bodies are grounded in the shape, size, and motion – i.e., the primary qualities – of bodies too small to be detected by our senses. Surely, however, a size or shape too small to be detected by our senses is not a power to cause ideas in us (Jacovides 2007, 117)! If we consider length, for instance, as an intrinsic feature belonging to the constitutions of bodies, and suppose that this intrinsic feature comes in degrees, then it is perfectly intelligible to suppose that there are degrees smaller (and also greater) than we can detect.

The third problem is that Locke sometimes contrasts primary and secondary qualities by claiming that secondary qualities are, and primary qualities are not, mind-dependent (EHU, §§2.8.17, 2.31.2).²⁴ This claim is apparently meant to follow from the fact that secondary qualities are powers and powers are relations (Rickless 1997, 304-308). However, if all qualities are powers, then the argument would apply to primary qualities as well as secondary qualities.

23. Jacovides sees a similar ambiguity in Locke's use of 'power' and uses it to explain away Locke's definition of qualities as powers (Jacovides 2007, 111-112).

24. Rickless 1997 takes this to be the fundamental contrast between primary and secondary qualities.

My interpretation does have the consequence (given Locke's understanding of powers) that, for both primary and secondary qualities, in the absence of perceivers, the quality properly so-called (i.e., the power to cause the idea) would not exist. Likewise, in both cases, the mechanical constitution which (in the actual world where there are human perceivers) grounds that power would still exist. However, because of the resemblance between primary quality ideas and mechanical constitutions, mechanical constitutions are described in primary quality terms (cf. McCann 2011, 176). Thus when Locke asserts that "The particular *Bulk, Number, Figure, and motion of the parts of Fire, or Snow, are really in them, whether any ones Senses perceive them or no*" (EHU, §2.8.17), and that the "Configuration of Particles" which grounds the color of porphyry persists in the dark, although the color does not (§2.8.19), he means only to say that the mechanical constitutions persist. This is confirmed by the fact that Locke refers, in these texts, to the configuration of the 'parts' and 'particles' of the substances in question, and not to the primary qualities of the (macro) substances themselves.

The resemblance claim which Locke endorses is that primary quality ideas do, and secondary quality ideas do not, resemble the real constitutions which ground the powers of objects to cause those ideas. This view, however, does not require us to deny that primary qualities are 'powers,' provided that we take 'power' to refer here, not to some dispositional property, but rather to a mechanical constitution which grounds a dispositional property. As I have said, I do not think that Locke is entirely clear on this distinction, so that he often sloppily runs ideas, powers, and constitutions together. I suspect that one reason for this is that Locke takes quality *terms* in plain language, words like 'red,' to be ambiguous between these three alternatives: that is, 'red' can refer either to (i) the idea of red, (ii) the power to cause the idea of red, or (iii) the (possibly disjunctive) mechanical constitution in virtue of which objects have the power

to cause the idea of red. This applies to both primary and secondary quality terms, the only difference being that in the case of primary qualities (i) resembles (iii).

Admittedly, at some points in EHU, §2.30.2 Locke talks as if there are two ways of corresponding to a real constitution, “as to Causes, or Patterns.” However, what Locke actually says is that in either case “it suffices that [the ideas] are constantly produced by [the constitutions].” Even for primary quality ideas, being constantly produced by some particular constitution is sufficient for veridicality; resemblance is not required. Locke’s view is that primary quality ideas represent *and* resemble, but no simple idea represents *by* resembling. All simple ideas, for Locke, represent their causes.²⁵

As has already been mentioned, the mind is, according to Locke, capable of performing a wide variety of operations on its ideas. Some of these, like judging, construct complex mental states which are not themselves ideas. Others construct new ideas. The most important of these, for our purposes, is, again, abstraction. It is often thought that Locke is not entirely consistent on the subject of abstraction. It is claimed that §4.7.9, which Berkeley so frequently cites, is a sloppy formulation. It surely cannot be Locke’s considered view that when we think of triangularity in general there is, in the mind, some entity which, though triangular, is “neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalenen; but all and none of these at once.” More plausible is the account of §2.11.9, a selective attention account similar to the one given by the Port-Royalists (see Winkler 1989, 39-42; Ayers 1991, 1:49, 1:242-263; Lennon 2007, 254). We shall return to the question of how exactly Locke’s account of abstraction is to be understood in our evaluation of Berkeley’s attack on it in the next chapter. There, I will argue that both Locke and the Port-Royalists hold that selective attention is part

25. Martha Brandt Bolton likewise emphasizes that “the representative character of all simple ideas, images or not, rests on their causal connections;” however, Bolton is at least somewhat ambivalent as to how seriously Locke’s resemblance thesis is to be taken (Bolton 2007, 83-84). The tenability of this sort of causal theory of representation will be examined in §2.3, below.

of a process by which new ideas are constructed, and that this approach allows for a consistent reading of Locke's texts. For now, it suffices to observe that abstraction is one of the most important operations the mind performs on its ideas, for it is by this means that ideas become general, and it is only by having general ideas that we can make meaningful use of general terms (EHU, §§3.1.3, 3.3.6-9).

This, then, is Locke's theory. All simple ideas originate in either sensation or reflection, and represent the real constitution which causes them. Some of these ideas, the primary quality ideas, resemble these real constitutions; others, the secondary quality ideas, do not. All of these ideas are 'images' in the sense that they are all of the same general sort as the impressions of inner and outer sense. A variety of operations can be performed on these simple ideas, some of which generate new ideas, and some of which generate judgments and other complex mental states. Language consists in the arbitrary, conventional linking of public signs with these private mental states. Comparing Locke to the Port-Royalists, we can see radical disagreement about the nature and origin of ideas give way to substantial agreement about the role those ideas, once got, play in language and thought. Locke, too, clearly endorses the Theory of Meanings.

1.4 Sergeant

John Sergeant combines the Theory of Meanings with an account of the nature of mental representation which is radically at odds with 'modern' Cartesian and Lockean accounts. Sergeant says that he "observ'd that Philosophy labour'd and languish'd under many *Complicated Distempers*, (all springing from this way of *Ideas*) and that they were grown Epidemical." He therefore resolved "to Stub up by the Roots that *Way it self*" (Sergeant 1697, Epistle Dedicatory). The fundamental error involved in the Way of Ideas is, according to Sergeant, its failure to distinguish adequately between notions and

phantasms (Sergeant 1697, Pref §19).²⁶ As was noted earlier, the Cartesians did indeed recognize the ‘corporeal imagination’ and its representations as distinct from the pure intellect and its representations. However, from Sergeant’s perspective, the Cartesians make notions (intellectual representations) much too similar to phantasms (corporeal images).

Sergeant says that the main point of dispute between himself and the ideists is “*Whether our knowledge is made by the Thing being in our Mind when we know it, or an Idea or Similitude of it only*” (Pref §25). In other words, Sergeant interprets the ideists – both the Cartesians and Locke – as holding that thinking involves the presence of a mental ‘copy’ of the external object in the mind. This entity is the ‘idea.’ As we have seen, this description applies to Arnauld, who identifies the idea with the act of perception, insofar as Arnauld’s adverbialism builds the features of the represented object into the intrinsic nature of the act. The description applies much more straightforwardly to Locke.

According to Sergeant, the ideist approach necessarily fails to distinguish appropriately between notions and phantasms, and, as a result, fails to secure human knowledge. Sergeant insists on four criteria for distinguishing notions from phantasms (Pref §§20-24): (1) phantasms are sensible while notions are insensible; (2) notions, not phantasms, are the meanings of words; (3) purely corporeal living beings (‘beasts’) can have phantasms, but only spiritual beings can have notions; and, finally, (4) notions can, but phantasms cannot, be general. All four criteria would be endorsed by the Cartesians as part of the distinction between the representations of the pure intellect and those of the corporeal imagination. However, as Sergeant recognizes, Locke’s attitude toward these criteria is ambivalent at best. First, as we have seen, Locke explicitly announces that

26. Sergeant’s subtitle, ‘against the fancies of the ideists,’ is a pun on this criticism: the ‘fancy’ is both the faculty which receives phantasms, and the faculty which invents fictions. See Sergeant 1697, 80-82.

he will use ‘idea’ to mean “*Phantasm, Notion, Species*, or whatever it is that the mind can be employ’d about in thinking” (EHU, §1.1.8), or, as Sergeant sees the matter, that he will use ‘idea’ “very *Equivocally*” (Sergeant 1697, 3). Locke, then, evidently does not think the distinction on which Sergeant insists very important. Sergeant ultimately thinks that Locke is an inconsistent imagist: according to Sergeant, Locke’s usual position is that we have only phantasms, but he sometimes illicitly imports notions (42, 160-162). This is not an especially charitable interpretation of Locke, but given both the evidence for Locke’s imagism and the philosophical problems it causes him, Sergeant’s reading is certainly defensible.

To be an imagist (in the ‘sensationalist’ sense) just is to reject criterion (1) and hold that all mental representations are sensible. Locke does, however, come close to endorsing criteria (2), (3), and (4). Locke holds that the key distinction between humans and non-human animals is that humans have the power of abstraction (EHU, §§2.11.10-11). Abstract ideas are necessary for general thought, and are the meanings of most words (§3.3.1). Thus if for ‘notion’ we substitute ‘abstract idea,’ then Locke will regard (2), (3), and (4) as, at least, very nearly correct.²⁷

It seems, then, that Sergeant’s criteria are endorsed consistently by the Cartesians and occasionally and partially by Locke. However, Sergeant believes that the ‘ideists’ have failed to see a crucial consequence of criterion (2). Sergeant affirms that “*the Meanings of Words . . . are most evidently . . . our Notions.*” However, “*we do not intend or mean when we speak of any thing, to talk or discourse of what’s Like that Thing, but of whats the same with it*” (Sergeant 1697, Pref §21).²⁸ Sergeant expresses the argument

27. There is a further caveat to Locke’s endorsement of (3), as written, and that is his notorious uncertainty about whether humans are really spiritual beings (EHU, §4.3.6). This is not important for present purposes.

28. Daniel Flage radically misunderstands these claims of Sergeant’s when he takes Sergeant to be claiming that “there is no resemblance between one’s notion of a thing and the thing of which one has

quite clearly in a later passage: “Notions are *Meanings*, or (to speak more properly) *what is meant* by the words we use: But *what’s meant* by the words is the *Thing it self*; therefore *the Thing it self* is in the Meaning; and consequently in the *Mind*” (Sergeant 1697, 33). He goes on to illustrate his point vividly by means of the following example: “when a Gentleman bids his Servant fetch him a Pint of Wine; he does not mean to bid him to fetch the *Idea* of Wine in his own head, but the Wine it self which is in the Cellar” (33).²⁹

Sergeant’s central claim is that the Way of Ideas necessarily introduces the Veil of Ideas. If some mental entity stands between my thought and its object then, according to Sergeant, I do not succeed in making cognitive contact with the external world. If I am to think about external objects, then the objects themselves must be somehow available to thought, or, as Sergeant prefers to put it, ‘in the understanding.’ This is precisely what a notion is: “*A notion is the very thing it self existing in my understanding*” (27). Having such notions – that is, having external objects in one’s understanding – is, according to Sergeant, an absolutely indispensable condition of knowledge.

Sergeant is a direct realist in a much more straightforward, unambiguous sense than Arnauld. Sergeant holds that the mind makes direct contact with the external world without the mediation of any kind of mental ‘copies’ of the objects of thought. A crucial question facing direct realists is *how* the mind manages to do this. What relation obtains between the mind and an external object which results in the mind having a thought

a notion” (Flage 1987, 175). Sergeant is quite clearly arguing that one’s notion and the thing one has a notion of are not *merely* resembling, but *identical*. As Sergeant explicitly recognizes, in a passage Flage quotes, for the notion to be identical to its object is not for it to be *unlike* it, but for it to be “more than Like it” (Sergeant 1697, Pref §21). Identity implies not only resemblance, but *perfect* resemblance. On the role of resemblance in Aristotelian theories of perception, see Carriero 2009, 136-138.

29. DHP, 229 may be intended as a response to this passage from Sergeant.

about that object? How is it that, if thinking about and perceiving objects involves being somehow related to them, we can think about objects which are not present? Even worse, how is it that we can think of objects which never have existed and never will exist? The ideists can provide relatively straightforward answers to these questions: some mental particular, the idea, exists in the mind whenever we are thinking. A thought is about some external object whenever the idea ‘matches’ that object, and this is something the idea can do even when the object is not present. Furthermore, there is no bar to the existence of ideas which do not match any objects at all. The adverbialism endorsed by Arnauld (and possibly Descartes) shares this structure, despite the lack of an immediate object standing between the act of perception and the external object. Perceiving an object is still a matter of having a mental state that matches it, and perceptions that lack external objects are still explained as perceptions that fail to match anything. However, Sergeant, like Berkeley, is puzzled by the question of what this matching could amount to. Furthermore, Sergeant anticipates Berkeley in arguing that the very structure of the ideist theory makes it impossible to verify that this ‘matching’ occurs in even a single case (Sergeant 1697, 31-32; DHP, 246).

Sergeant believes, then, that the notion (mental content) must be identical to the external object if we are to succeed in making cognitive contact with the world. Returning to Sergeant’s own terminology, we may say that this claim faces two difficulties. First, how can one and the same object exist both in the understanding and in the external world? Second, how can we have notions where there are no corresponding ‘things themselves’?

Before addressing Sergeant’s responses to these questions, it will be worthwhile to pause a moment and compare Sergeant to Berkeley. Berkeley agrees with Sergeant that if we are to have knowledge of bodies, they must somehow be ‘in the understanding.’

He also agrees with Sergeant that existing ‘ideist’ theories cannot meet this requirement, and so cannot secure our knowledge of bodies. However, Berkeley’s distinctive theory of bodies consists in his radical answer to the two questions just raised: the same object *cannot* exist both in the understanding and in the external world, so, if we are to have knowledge of bodies, bodies must exist *exclusively* in the understanding. Furthermore, since our mental representations of bodies just are the bodies themselves, we cannot have mental representations where there are no corresponding ‘things themselves.’

Sergeant, unlike Berkeley, attempts to give materialist answers to these two questions. In response to the first question, Sergeant first criticizes the Scholastic species theory of perception (Sergeant 1697, 59-61),³⁰ then develops a theory which is not importantly different from it. According to Sergeant’s theory, certain ‘effluvia’ flow from bodies and eventually, by a complicated causal chain, reach

some Chief *Corporeal* Part in Man, which is *immediately* united with the *Soul*, as the *Matter* with its *Form*, and, therefore, is Primarily *Corporeo-Spiritual*, and includes both Natures. Whence, when that Part is affected, after its peculiar Nature, *Corporeally*; the Soul is affected after *its* Nature, that is, *Spiritually*, or *Knowingly* (66).

Now, “Those *Effluviums* sent out from Bodies, have the *very Natures* of those Bodies in them, or rather are themselves Lesser Bodies of the *Self-Same* Nature” (69). As a result, when the Corporeo-Spiritual Part is affected in this way, the parallel effect in the soul is

30. See Aristotle *De Anima*, B1-Γ2; Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 1.84. Flage 1987, 174-180 repeatedly characterizes Sergeant as a ‘Scholastic’; Sergeant’s discussion of the species theory shows that he would object quite strenuously to that label. Sergeant remarks that ‘the Schools’ “undertook to explicate [Aristotle on sensory perception] and did it untowardly” (Sergeant 1697, 58). Later in the passage Sergeant is more explicit: “The Schoolmen . . . when they are at a Plunge how to find out a Reason for any difficult Point . . . create some *Entity* which God and Nature never made, and then . . . alledge ’twas *that Entity* which did the business” (60). Sergeant disavows this practice and aims, by this means, to separate his Aristotelianism from Scholasticism.

knowledge of that nature. The different senses are affected by objects in different ways, with the result that the effluvia carried to a single sense convey the nature of the object only partially (Sergeant 1697, 70). The thing which is both in the understanding and in the external world is, on Sergeant's view, an Aristotelian (immanent) universal. Ultimately, then Sergeant's direct realism extends only to universals, and not to particulars. Furthermore, Sergeant's direct realism is not combined with content externalism: what is represented is entirely a matter of what universals are in the understanding, and the instantiations of universals in the understanding are distinct from their instantiations in external objects. Sergeant thinks that this nonetheless results in our making successful cognitive contact with the external world, precisely because these are *universals*: the whiteness in my understanding is *numerically identical to* the whiteness of the paper I am looking at, and *that* is how I know the paper to be white.³¹

To our second question, how we can have notions to which there is no corresponding object, Sergeant responds that there is a sense in which we cannot. 'Fancies,' as he calls them, occur when previously stored effluvia are "agitated disorderly" so that they "imprint[] *Incoherent Phantasms on the Seat of Knowledge*" (80). Sergeant is not totally clear on this point, but given his theory it seems that he must say that these are not genuine notions, but counterfeits of some sort.

The notions which enter the soul by means of the effluvia are, according to Sergeant, all of the raw materials for cognition. He takes Locke's refutation of the doctrine of innate ideas to have been decisive (62). He needs, therefore, to explain how, from these materials, we can build all of our representations. One way he believes we can do this is by negating or recombining our notions (77-78, 82-85). Unlike Locke and the Port-Royalists, Sergeant does not need to introduce any special mechanism by which notions

31. On Sergeant's theory of sensory perception, see Southgate 2000, 296-299.

become general; since the natures that enter the understanding are merely partial, they are already general (Sergeant 1697, 79).

Despite this radically different account of mental representation which, as has been noted, has important similarities to Berkeley's own views, Sergeant adopts the Theory of Meanings essentially unmodified. On Sergeant's view, notions are entirely prior to language, and "Words are good for nothing in the World but meerly and purely to *Signifie*" (356).

1.5 Conclusion

The theory of mental representation, and especially sensory perception, was one of the major subjects of debate in seventeenth century philosophy, and an enormous variety of theories were proposed. Three widely differing views have been surveyed here. However, these views share a common structure: each meaningful word is linked by convention to some entity which is the 'meaning' of that word and which is, in turn, non-conventionally linked to an external object in the world. It is in virtue of their connection to these 'meanings' that words are meaningful. Radical differences about the nature and origin of meanings are accompanied by genuine agreement on the role these meanings need to play in a theory of the meaningful use of language.

Because of Berkeley's focus on abstract ideas, it might be thought that his arguments, in the Introduction to the *Principles* and elsewhere, are directed merely against a particular theory of the nature of meanings – that is, against the view that meanings are abstract ideas. In what follows, I will show that this reading is incorrect. Berkeley means instead to argue that no entity of any kind could possibly play the roles that meanings are supposed to play in the Theory of Meanings. Berkeley argues for a radical rejection of the picture of thought and language which was common ground among

his predecessors. Furthermore, as I will show in chapter 3, the rejection of meanings leads Berkeley to an even more radical thesis: the rejection of the priority of thought to language. Our powers of mental and linguistic representation alike rely on conventional rules for the use of arbitrary signs in trains of speech, reasoning, and action.

Chapter 2

Berkeley's Attack on Meanings

The main philosophical argument of the Introduction to the *Principles* begins with the announcement that it will be “proper to premise somewhat . . . concerning the nature and abuse of language” (PHK, Intro §6). Berkeley means this quite seriously: the famous discussion of abstraction which follows is about the use and abuse of language (contrary to Atherton 1987, 45-47).¹ The question which particularly concerns Berkeley is the question of how meaningful words relate to ideas.² Berkeley believes that serious confusions are caused in reasoning with words both when we neglect to consider the corresponding ideas where they exist (PHK, Intro §§21-25) and when we look for corresponding ideas where they are not to be had (MI, §61; PHK, §§135-142; cf. Brykman 2010, 407).

Most of Berkeley's explicit argumentation is directed against a view that might be taken as a rather simplistic reading of either Locke or the Port-Royalists. This view is stated in more detail in *Alciphron*, where Berkeley's opponent says:

Words are signs: they do or should stand for ideas; which so far as they suggest they are significant. But words that suggest no ideas are insignificant. He who annexes a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense: but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense . . . He

1. Roberts 2007, 43-58 also emphasizes philosophy of language as the context for Berkeley's attack, and my interpretation is in substantial accord with his. However, I treat the matter in considerably more detail than Roberts does.

2. Berkeley's concern with this question grew out of the controversy about religious mysteries occasioned by Toland 1696. See Berman 1994, 15-17; Pearce, forthcoming(a); and also below, p. 271.

who really thinks has a train of ideas succeeding each other and connected in his mind: and when he expresses himself by discourse, each word suggests a distinct idea to the hearer or reader; who by that means has the same train of ideas in his, which was in the mind of the speaker or writer. As far as this effect is produced, so far the discourse is intelligible, has sense and meaning. ([Alc](#), §7.2)

Although *Alciphron* is from a significantly later period in Berkeley's career, there is every reason to suppose that this is precisely what Berkeley had in mind when he referred in 1710 to the view "that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas, and that every significant name stands for an idea" ([PHK](#), Intro §19). Now, the view as described presupposes ideism, and so does not directly apply to Sergeant (or Plato, or Aristotle). It is also simpler than the theories given by paradigmatic ideists like Locke and the Port-Royalists. I claim, however, that Berkeley does not exploit these features of his exposition in his arguments. The view described is a harmless simplification, insofar as Berkeley aims to attack a fundamental presupposition shared by nearly all of his predecessors, and by the simplistic view which is the explicit target of criticism. In other words, from Berkeley's perspective, the mistake made by his predecessors is so fundamental and pervasive that examining the details of their views is unnecessary.

I aim, in what follows, to vindicate this perspective both interpretively and philosophically. I will argue that what Berkeley is attacking is the Theory of Meanings, the view "that every name has, or ought to have, one only precise and settled signification" (Intro §18). The fact that, for Sergeant, the signification is not an idea, is not relevant, nor is the fact that, for Locke and the Port-Royalists words sometimes signify mental acts. Berkeley's main point would apply just as well, for instance, to a theory which took each name to signify some Platonic entity (cf. [Roberts 2007](#), 51-53). There are

no ready-made ‘meanings’ existing prior to the introduction of language waiting to be assigned symbols. Being meaningful need not involve having a meaning – or, in Berkeley’s language, words can be significant despite not signifying anything (cf. Browne 1733, 534). Meaning or significance comes about when agents *use* signs in certain ways.

In this chapter, I will first outline in more detail the dialectical structure of Berkeley’s argument against the Theory of Meanings. After this, I will discuss the main lemma in Berkeley’s argument, namely, the claim that there are no abstract ideas. Next, I will discuss two tactics for escaping the argument: adopting a causal theory of representation, and taking representation as primitive. I will argue that the most plausible causal theories actually accept Berkeley’s main conclusion, that what a given mental state represents depends on how it is used by the mind. Taking representation as primitive is a way of escaping the argument, but primitive representation is mysterious and unparsimonious. I conclude, therefore, that while Berkeley’s argument is not ultimately decisive, it does put him in a very strong position, *provided* that he can give an alternative account of our cognitive and linguistic abilities. In the following chapters, I will take up the question of whether Berkeley can do this.

2.1 The Dialectical Structure of Berkeley’s Attack

In order to understand Berkeley’s attack, it is necessary to distinguish the *textual* structure of the Introduction from the *dialectical* structure of the attack. By ‘textual structure’ I simply mean the way in which the presentation of ideas and arguments is organized in the text. By ‘dialectical structure’ I mean the way in which arguments are deployed against positions, objections against arguments, and so forth. Determining the textual structure is fairly straightforward, but determining the dialectical structure is somewhat

more complicated, and the latter is what we must achieve if we are to understand what each argument is meant to do, and whether it succeeds at its task.

The textual structure of the Introduction to the *Principles* is as follows. After some prefatory remarks on aims and methodology (PHK, Intro §§1-5), Berkeley introduces the doctrine of abstraction, and describes different versions of that doctrine at some length (Intro §§6-9). He then raises his most often repeated consideration against abstraction, which I will call the ‘phenomenological appeal’ (Intro §10). He simply reports that, upon introspection, he cannot find, in his own mind, any abstract ideas. He also claims that “there are grounds to think most men will acknowledge themselves to be in [his] case. The generality of men which are simple and illiterate never pretend to abstract notions” (Intro §10). Now, if Berkeley is right that the existence of abstract ideas is, at least, not immediately and obviously confirmed by introspection, then one wonders why anyone believes in such things in the first place. Berkeley says that he will therefore “examine what can be alleged in defence of the doctrine of abstraction, and try if [he] can discover what it is that inclines the men of speculation to embrace an opinion, so remote from common sense as that seems to be” (Intro §11). Berkeley now produces his main arguments against abstraction (Intro §§11-17). Finally, he reconstructs what he takes to be his opponents’ argument for abstraction, and tells us that, since the conclusion is false, we must reject one of the premises, and the premise to be rejected is the Theory of Meanings, which, he argues, is independently implausible (Intro §§18-20). Lastly, Berkeley gives an account of the philosophical benefits which will follow from having corrected the errors in question (Intro §§21-24).

If, as I have suggested, we ought to take Berkeley at his word when he says that the discussion is about the use and abuse of language, then we must take §§18-20 as the climax to which Berkeley is building. If this claim about language is the main point,

then we can best understand the dialectical structure by reversing the textual order and considering Berkeley's opponents' argument for abstraction first. That argument, as Berkeley sees it, goes something like this:

- (1) Every meaningful name signifies some one idea.
- (2) Not every meaningful name signifies some one particular idea.

Therefore,

- (3) Not all ideas are particular.³

This is a fair reconstruction of an argument endorsed by Locke. Locke affirms explicitly that “so far as Words are of Use and Signification, so far there is a constant connexion between the Sound and the *Idea*; and a designation, that the one stand for the other: without which Application of them, they are nothing but so much insignificant noise” (EHU, §3.2.7). Furthermore, any shift in which idea is immediately signified by a word is classified by Locke as an “abuse of Words” (§3.10.5). The proper use of words (or at least names; note that in this discussion Locke neglects his qualification regarding ‘particles’) requires that some one idea be attached consistently as the immediate signification of each word. This is an endorsement of (1).

According to Locke, although the proper use of words requires that each word be consistently attached to one and only one idea, it is nevertheless crucial to “the perfection of Language” that “*signs* can be so made use of, as *to comprehend several particular Things*.” Locke says that this “advantageous use of Sounds was obtain’d by the difference of the *Ideas* they were made signs of. Those names becoming general, which are made to stand for general *Ideas*” (§3.1.3). Locke thus endorses (2), and draws the conclusion that there must be general (i.e. non-particular) ideas.

3. For similar reconstructions of this argument, see Weinberg 1965, 26; Stoneham 2002, 224-225.

Unlike Locke, Sergeant and the Port-Royalists begin from general thought, and only afterward introduce general terms. (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 37-40; Sergeant 1697, Pref §24). However, they are committed to the two premises of the argument, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that something like this was among their implicit reasons for believing in abstract ideas.⁴

A clarification is in order about the conclusion of the argument. Locke, like Berkeley, holds that “all things that exist are only particulars” (EHU, §3.3.6; cf. EHU, §3.3.1; DHP, 192), and ideas, of course, exist. Locke would agree, then, that, for instance, the abstract idea of triangle is a particular idea but, he holds, this idea nevertheless *represents* generally. As we shall see, it is precisely this divide between the idea’s own nature and its representational content that Berkeley attacks: according to Berkeley, nothing which is itself particular could possibly be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally.

The main part of Berkeley’s response to the argument for abstract ideas is a direct rebuttal of the conclusion, which will be examined below. If the conclusion is false, then at least one of the premises must be rejected. Berkeley argues that (1) is independently implausible on a number of grounds, while (2) is an evident truth. Even in mundane cases where a word *can* be substituted for an idea, it need not be substituted in order for the claim to be understood. Berkeley motivates this with the example of a variable in algebra, which does indeed stand for some particular quantity, although the user need not know what that quantity is (PHK, Intro §19). Indeed, although Berkeley does not make this point explicitly, the project of solving an algebra problem is typically the project of *finding out* what a particular letter stands for; one uses the notation in order

4. Sergeant actually frames these considerations as an argument *against* abstract ideas: since ideas cannot be general, he claims, we must have notions instead. His reasons for holding that ideas (phantasms) cannot be general are similar to Berkeley’s (see below). For Sergeant’s own account of general notions, see Sergeant 1697, 79.

to find out what the notation signifies, hence one clearly does not need to know what it signifies before one can use it. Furthermore, there are meaningful bits of language which do not have this sort of connection to ideas at all, and there are meaningful uses of language where the aim is to do something other than excite an idea, such as to evoke an emotional or practical response (PHK, Intro §20).

This is the central argument of the Introduction: no one idea could possibly be the meaning of a general term. Nevertheless, general terms such as ‘triangle’ are paradigmatic examples of meaningful bits of language. Furthermore, plausibly, there are many other examples of meaningful uses of language which do not involve the speaker’s idea being excited in the hearer. The correct response, then, is to reject the Theory of Meanings.

The argument can be generalized as follows: no one entity could possibly be *the* (one and only) meaning of a general term. Nevertheless general terms are meaningful. Therefore, a term can be meaningful without a convention by which it is linked with some one entity which is the meaning of that term. But of course terms do get their meaning by means of certain linguistic conventions. The linguistic conventions which make terms meaningful must therefore not consist merely in a one-to-one mapping of terms to meanings. As we shall see beginning in the next chapter, Berkeley holds that these conventions consist, instead, of rules for the *use* of the terms in question for a variety of theoretical and practical purposes. An important consequence of this view is that the adoption of such rules can actually *increase* the expressive power of thought.

2.2 The Case Against Abstraction

The case against abstraction occupies §§10-17 of the Introduction. §10 contains what I am calling ‘the phenomenological appeal,’ the claim that abstract ideas are not to be

found in introspection. §§11-17 contain Berkeley's actual arguments. Commentators have often either dismissed the phenomenological appeal or not mentioned it at all and focused instead on the arguments.⁵ This seems to be a sensible approach, since philosophers are in the business of making and evaluating arguments. However, without paying serious attention to the phenomenological appeal, we will not successfully grasp Berkeley's thought on this matter. Berkeley believes that it is a *datum of experience* that we do not have abstract ideas; for him, the arguments for the impossibility of abstract ideas are merely a secondary support. Our task here will be to determine exactly what phenomenological reflection Berkeley invites us to perform and what result he expects us to find. After this, we will be in a position to examine Berkeley's arguments against the possibility of abstract ideas and use them to explain the phenomenological data. Finally, we will examine Berkeley's arguments to the effect that abstract ideas cannot play the theoretical roles they are meant to play.

2.2.1 The Phenomenological Appeal

While the arguments against abstraction appear only rarely, the phenomenological appeal appears again and again throughout Berkeley's corpus. For instance, here are just a few of the widely scattered occurrences:

5. The phenomenological appeal is mentioned dismissively by Flage 1986, 499; Atherton 1987, 49; and Pappas 2000, 49. It is not discussed by Bolton 1987; Winkler 1989; or Stoneham 2002. Weinberg denies that the phenomenological appeal is the basis of Berkeley's anti-abstractionism (Weinberg 1965, 13), but later indicates that Berkeley's philosophical investigation of abstract ideas is meant to explain the results of the phenomenological appeal (24-25). I agree with this latter point, but if this is the purpose of the investigation then Berkeley must have rejected abstract ideas on the basis of the phenomenological appeal *before* undertaking it. Rickless 2012, 733-735 takes the phenomenological appeal much more seriously, and in fact holds that it is the sole basis for Berkeley's rejection of 'generalizing abstraction' (as distinct from 'singling abstraction'). Although I do not deny that Berkeley recognizes a distinction between different varieties of abstraction, the interpretation that I will be defending holds that he rejects every one of these varieties of abstraction for the same basic reasons, so that the phenomenological appeal and the impossibility arguments are meant to apply equally to generalizing and singling abstraction.

Now I do not find that I can perceive, imagine, or any wise frame in my mind such an abstract idea [of extension] as is here spoken of. A line which is neither black, nor white, nor blue, nor yellow, *etc.*, nor long, nor short, nor rough, nor smooth, nor square, nor round, *etc.*, is perfectly incomprehensible. This I am sure of as to myself; how far the faculties of other men may reach they best can tell . . . After reiterated endeavours to apprehend the general idea of a triangle, I have found it altogether incomprehensible (NTV, §§124, 126).

Hylas. But what say you to ‘pure intellect’? May not abstracted ideas be framed by that faculty?

Philonous. Since I cannot frame abstract ideas at all, it is plain, I cannot frame them by the help of ‘pure intellect’ . . . But for your farther satisfaction, try if you can frame the idea of any figure, abstracted from all particularities of size, or even from other sensible qualities.

Hyl. Let me think a little – I do not find that I can (DHP, 193-194).

But upon looking into my own mind, I do not find that I have or can have these general abstract ideas of a man or triangle abovementioned, or of colour prescinded from all particular colours.⁶ Though I shut mine eyes, and use mine utmost efforts, and reflect on all that passes in my own mind I find it utterly impossible to form such ideas (Alc, §7.6).

As Berkeley indicates in the footnote to the *Alciphron* passage, his fullest published treatment of the matter is in our main text, the Introduction to the *Principles*. There,

6. Berkeley’s footnote: See the introduction to a treatise concerning the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, printed in the year MDCCX. Where the absurdity of abstract ideas is fully considered.

after a lengthy discussion of different sorts of abstraction, Berkeley describes exactly what he believes he can, and cannot, conceive:

Whether others have this wonderful faculty of abstracting their ideas, they best can tell; for my self I find indeed I have a faculty of imagining, or representing to my self the ideas of those particular things I have perceived and of variously compounding and dividing them. I can imagine a man with two heads or the upper parts of a man joined to the body of a horse. I can consider the hand, the eye, the nose, each by it self abstracted or separated from the rest of the body. But then 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. And it is equally impossible for me to form the abstract idea of motion distinct from the body moving, and which is neither swift nor slow, curvilinear nor rectilinear; and the like may be said of all other abstract general ideas whatsoever. 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' (PHK, Intro §10).

As has been said above, Berkeley believes that the reason people think they have abstract ideas is that they meaningfully use words which do not correspond to any one non-abstract idea. Because this is the source of the error, Berkeley urges us, in order to perform this phenomenological reflection correctly, to remove ‘the veil of words’ (see [MI](#), §11). As Euphranor ‘entreats’ Alciphron, “be not amused by terms, lay aside the word *force* and exclude every other thing from your thoughts, and then see what precise idea you have of force” ([Alc](#), §7.9; cf. [An](#), §§36-37; [DFM](#), §48). Alciphron is further urged “to exclude the consideration of [force’s] subject and effects” ([Alc](#), §7.9). Returning from force (which will be discussed in more detail in §§3.3 and 6.2) to the simpler case of the general triangle, we can see that what Berkeley challenges us to do is to think of *triangle* without connecting it to any other ideas, whether ideas of words, ideas of particular triangles, or processes of inference about triangles. The challenge is to get the alleged abstract general idea of triangle *by itself* and *hold it still*. This, Berkeley claims, cannot be done.

As Berkeley says, “Whether others have this wonderful faculty of abstracting their ideas, they best can tell.” I can simply report that my own reflections agree with Berkeley’s. In the course of a train of thought, I evidently have the capacity to think generally, and also to think of things not directly represented in sensory experience, such as (to use some of Berkeley’s favorite examples) God and virtue. However, just as Hume famously remarked that “when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other” ([THN](#), §1.4.6.3), so I find that whenever I try to stop my train of thought and hold one item still, by itself, for examination, the item I find is always some mental image, a mental image which may be ‘hazy’ like Locke’s vision through a thick mist ([LW](#), 4:221-222), but is never indeterminate in the way an abstract idea is supposed to be.

The phenomenological appeal has been criticized by Michael Jacovides. According to Jacovides, Berkeley's theory of representation 'corrupted his capacity to conceive' (Jacovides 2009). Jacovides is concerned primarily with the Master Argument (Berkeley's challenge to the reader to conceive of unperceived sensible qualities), but his thesis, if correct, ought to apply to the doctrine of abstract ideas in general since the Master Argument simply asks the reader to perform a particular feat of abstraction (PHK, §22; DHP, 200). Jacovides' thesis, thus generalized, is that it is precisely because Berkeley's understanding of ideas rules out the possibility of abstract ideas by means of the arguments to be discussed below that Berkeley found himself unable to frame abstract ideas. If this is right, then, despite appearances, the arguments are really prior to the phenomenological appeal after all.

Jacovides' central claim is that, as a result of endorsing the theory of representation he endorsed, Berkeley truly was somehow intellectually defective. According to this view, Locke, Jacovides, and others do in fact have the capacity to frame abstract ideas, but Berkeley has lost this capacity. Admittedly, Jacovides' explicit thesis is more restricted than this: what Jacovides says is that "Because Berkeley believed that he couldn't conceive of unperceived bodies, he lost the ability to conceive of unperceived bodies" (Jacovides 2009, 428). The more general thesis which would be needed in order to apply Jacovides' criticism to the rejection of abstract ideas in general is considerably less plausible. Berkeley clearly *can* perform the cognitive tasks for which abstract ideas are supposed to be required, so if the theory of abstract ideas is to be correct, it must be claimed that Berkeley does indeed have them after all. We might therefore modify Jacovides' thesis and, instead of claiming that Berkeley lost the ability to frame abstract ideas, claim that he lost the ability to discover his abstract ideas introspectively. Although in Berkeley's day it was usually taken for granted that anyone can easily and

infallibly know the contents of her own mind, this view has now been called into question by philosophers and psychologists.⁷ A denier of the infallibility of introspection could simply claim that this is one of the cases in which introspection misleads. In the vein of Jacovides' original criticism, one could claim, in particular, that introspection is *theory-laden* and that Berkeley therefore simply cannot see those mental contents which do not accord with his theory of the mind.

Another plausible account of how the introspective appearances might mislead is as follows. Consider the phenomenon of peripheral vision. Peripheral vision differs from normal vision in a variety of ways. However, it is difficult to determine by direct examination of one's own case exactly what these ways are because when we focus our *attention* on the periphery of our vision, we naturally tend to focus our *eyes* on the formerly peripheral region. As a result, it can seem like our vision is the same all the way out to the edges, when in fact it is not. Now perhaps something like this goes on in thought as well. Perhaps there are certain ideas we have in the course of ordinary trains of thought which resist the sort of focus here attempted. In other words, perhaps we *have* mental contents other than images, but, when we make them the objects of intense focus and scrutiny, they *become* (or are replaced by) images.

The arguments to be discussed below will provide further reason to reject abstraction rather than trying to save it by one of these strategies. For now, it suffices to observe that those of us whose phenomenological reflections agree with Berkeley's have at least some reason to join him in rejecting abstract ideas. If we believe that introspection is fallible, this need only mean that the reason we have is defeasible.

The conclusion Berkeley draws from his phenomenological reflections is that the fundamental building blocks of thought are, one and all, determinate sensory images,

7. For a particularly radical rejection of the infallibility of introspection, see Schwitzgebel 2008.

images of the sort that could actually occur in (inner or outer) sensation. Thus the mind's ability to recombine the materials received from the senses goes only as far as the ability to construct *possibly* but not *actually* sensed images (cf. [MI](#), §26). If this is right, then there is no particular entity the mind can contain or 'latch onto' which could serve as the meaning of terms like 'triangle.' We must somehow manage to use this word meaningfully despite the fact that it does not have a meaning.

The challenge for Berkeley, then, is to explain how we manage to think about all of the many things we are able to think about given only these sparse cognitive building blocks, and this is closely intertwined with the overarching question of this dissertation, namely, how the perceived world, which, according to Berkeley, is constructed from these same sparse building blocks, gets to have the complexity and structure it exhibits. The answer to both questions is found in Berkeley's theory of language.

2.2.2 The Impossibility of Abstract Ideas

Berkeley tells Samuel Johnson⁸ that the reason he rejects Locke's "abstract idea of existence exclusive of perceiving and being perceived" is, quite simply, that he himself has no such idea ([CGB](#), 319). In other words, the phenomenological appeal is Berkeley's fundamental ground for rejecting abstraction. Berkeley's arguments for the impossibility of abstract ideas, to be examined here, are meant to *explain why* we have no abstract ideas (Weinberg 1965, 24-25), and also to convince others who may reject the phenomenological appeal. However, as Berkeley recognizes, the main reason for positing abstract ideas was always to explain certain cognitive and linguistic phenomena. The real test of Berkeley's view is, therefore, whether his own more parsimonious theory

8. The American philosopher (1696-1772), not the English lexicographer (1709-1784). For biographical information, see Hight [2013a](#), 607.

does a better job explaining the phenomena. In the Introduction, Berkeley argues both that abstract ideas are impossible and that they cannot play the intended explanatory roles. For reasons which will emerge, I think Berkeley's argument for the logical impossibility of abstract ideas is better construed as an argument for the claim that abstract ideas would be entities of an extremely mysterious sort, giving us all the more reason to prefer Berkeley's theory, *if* that theory can indeed explain the phenomena.

The primary argument against abstract ideas in §§12-17 is that they cannot do the theoretical work that they are meant to do. However, coming to the end of his attack on abstraction, Berkeley says that he has shown both “the impossibility of abstract ideas” and that “they are of no use for those ends to which they are thought necessary” (PHK, Intro §21). The argument for the first conclusion, that abstract ideas are impossible, is in fact rather difficult to find in the published Introduction.⁹ Berkeley cannot mean to refer to the phenomenological appeal, for this can, at best, convince me that *I* do not have abstract ideas; it provides no reason for thinking they are impossible.¹⁰ In response to this problem, Willis Doney has argued that the phenomenological appeal is actually meant to provide a *premise* in an argument for the impossibility of abstraction (Doney 1983). However, as Doney recognizes, the resulting argument would be quite weak dialectically, since the abstractionists will not accept the results of the phenomenological appeal (304-305). Furthermore, as we shall see, Berkeley does have arguments for the impossibility of abstract ideas which are fully independent of the phenomenological appeal.

9. Ian Hacking writes: “When you read Berkeley's Introduction, you should be struck by a surprising absence. Berkeley never *argues* that there are no abstract ideas!” (Hacking 1974, 39).

10. Perhaps, as Rickless says, introspection can even reveal that forming abstract ideas is impossible *for me* (Rickless 2012, 734n10); this certainly seems to be what Berkeley says, though one worries that Berkeley may be overstating his case. However that may be, Berkeley clearly recognizes that the phenomenological appeal cannot show that forming abstract ideas is impossible *for everyone*.

The text of the published Introduction is quite compressed, with the result that it can be quite difficult to tease out the specific arguments Berkeley has in mind. The fuller text of the *Manuscript Introduction* is illuminating on this point. Here, Berkeley provides two distinct arguments for the impossibility of abstraction.¹¹ The first is an argument that abstract ideas would *have* impossible combinations of features. The second is an argument that abstract ideas would *represent their objects* as having impossible combinations of features; since conceivability implies possibility, if the alleged objects of abstract ideas are impossible, abstract ideas are likewise impossible.

Comparing the manuscript with the published text, it becomes apparent that, by the time Berkeley wrote the published introduction, he believed that if he simply explained clearly enough what abstract ideas were supposed to be, readers would have no difficulty seeing that there couldn't possibly be such things, and so he thought it unnecessary to explain *why* there couldn't be such things (cf. Jesseph 1993, 24-27). Evidently he was right about this; until the twentieth century, Berkeley's critique of abstraction was regarded as his most successful philosophical project, despite the fact that the manuscript material was not widely available (Luce 1934, 126; cf. Bolton 1987, 61-62; Jacovides 2009, 417). Nevertheless, careful examination of the two arguments which are explicit in the manuscript and implicit in the published version will help us to understand exactly why Berkeley thought the doctrine of abstract ideas was not merely empirically false but actually incoherent. The two arguments are closely connected, so I will begin by explaining Berkeley's thinking in each case, and postpone evaluation of the arguments to the end of this section.

11. I omit discussion of a third argument, the argument about the general line (MI, §10), because I believe Berkeley ultimately rejected it as circular: the argument relies on the heterogeneity thesis Berkeley defended in NTV, but Berkeley's case for the heterogeneity thesis involved the rejection of abstraction (NTV, §122; Atherton 1990, 177-183).

The first argument is stated most explicitly in [MI](#), §8, which corresponds to [PHK](#), Intro §9. There, Berkeley says that in order to construct the abstract idea *man*, the mind “leaves out that which is peculiar to each, retaining onely that which is common to all.” However, he notes, it is common to all men to have color, but they do not have the same color, so the abstract idea must be colored without having any particular color. Likewise, it must have height, but not any particular height. Berkeley goes on to say, in a passage which he later crossed out,

Suppose now I should ask whether you comprehended in this your Abstract Idea of Man, the Ideas of Eyes, or Ears, or Nose, or Legs, or Arms, this might perhaps put you to a Stand for an Answer, for it must needs make an odd & frightful Figure, the Idea of a Man without all these. Yet it must be so to make it consistent with the Doctrine of Abstract Ideas, there being particular Men that want, some Arms, some Legs, some Noses &c.”¹²

Shortly thereafter, Berkeley goes on to complain that the abstract idea of *animal* must be “Without covering either of Hair, or Feathers, or Scales & yet ... not naked” ([MI](#), §9; cf. [NTV](#), §125).¹³

In the published version of this passage, Berkeley retains the statement that abstract ideas have determinables without a corresponding determinate, and concludes, without explanation that an idea of this type “is not easy to conceive” ([PHK](#), Intro §9). It is clear, however, that the conclusion is meant to be drawn in the same way. The abstract idea

12. I have omitted a variety of markings and insertions Berkeley made to this passage in the manuscript.

13. Crossed out text omitted.

Berkeley’s argument here bears an interesting resemblance to an argument of Aristotle’s against Platonic forms (Aristotle *Topics*, Z6 143b11-31; *Met.*, Z14; cf. Weinberg 1965, 42-43). It is noteworthy that in the *Manuscript Introduction*, Berkeley uses both of Aristotle’s examples, *animal* and *line* ([MI](#), §§9-10), though in the published Introduction the line has dropped out ([PHK](#), Intro §9). Aristotelian influence is also suggested by Berkeley’s interesting use of the word ‘Homonymy’ in [MI](#), §31. See below, pp. 96-98.

man must be colored without being any particular color, but there just can't be a thing like that.

The second argument for the impossibility of abstract ideas in the *Manuscript Introduction* is the argument from impossibility to inconceivability. Berkeley writes,

It is, I think, a receiv'd Axiom that an Impossibility cannot be conceiv'd. For what 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 (MI, §14; cf. DFM, §§45-46).¹⁴

This text is the most explicit deductive argument Berkeley provides for the impossibility of abstract ideas, and Kenneth Winkler apparently takes it to be Berkeley's *only* argument (Winkler 1989, 28-35; cf. Weinberg 1965, 14-15). Although the argument is, I think, distinct from the argument of MI, §§8-9 it is, as we shall see, closely connected.

Although this text has no direct parallel in the published introduction (it would have come between sections 10 and 11), the argument reappears in §21 where, after quoting Locke's notorious 'triangle passage' (EHU, §4.7.9), Berkeley sarcastically remarks, "He that can conceive such manifest Contradictions & Inconsistencys, 'tis fit he enjoy his Privilege." Although this sentence is removed, the section survives as PHK, Intro §13. It seems likely that, since, in the passage quoted, Locke had explicitly said that the abstract triangle was "something imperfect that cannot exist" there was no need for Berkeley to draw the obvious conclusion explicitly; instead, he repeats the phenomenological appeal.

The argument is quite simple, and can be reconstructed as follows:

14. Some markings and insertions omitted.

- (1) Only particular things can possibly exist.
- (2) Only things that can possibly exist can be conceived.

Therefore,

- (3) Only particular things can be conceived.¹⁵

Premise (2) is further supported by an allusion to an argument from Descartes: God's powers of conception are a strict superset of mine, but whatever God can conceive God can bring about, so whatever I can conceive God can bring about. It follows that nothing I can conceive is impossible (CSM, 2:254).¹⁶

Berkeley has, then, two main arguments. One is an argument that abstract ideas would *have* impossible combinations of features, and the other is an argument that abstract ideas would *represent* impossible combinations of features.¹⁷ There are three principles by which combinations of features can be ruled impossible:

The Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) For any feature F , no object is both F and not- F .

The Principle of Excluded Middle (PEM) For any object x and feature F , either x is F , or x is not- F .

15. Similar reconstructions can be found in Flage 1986, 489; Winkler 1989, 33; and Hight 2008, 224. Note that unlike Doney's reconstruction, this argument only relies on the plausible and widely accepted premise that impossibility implies inconceivability (i.e., by contraposition, that conceivability implies possibility), and not its much less plausible converse (Doney 1983, 297). On the acceptance of this principle by Berkeley's opponents, see Flage 1986, 490-492. The converse, on which Doney's argument relies, is in fact explicitly disavowed by Berkeley (DHP, 232 [1734 ed.]). See Ott 2004, 411.

16. It is, of course, important to Descartes that the principle applies only to *clear and distinct* conception. Berkeley never makes this qualification.

17. Pappas 2000, 49-64 also recognizes two distinct, though related, arguments against abstraction in Berkeley, which are similar to the two I discuss here.

The Principle of Determinacy (DET) If any object has a determinable property (e.g. color), then that object has a corresponding determinate property (e.g. red).

Berkeley's claim is that abstract ideas would both have and represent their objects as having combinations of features which violate one or more of these principles. This, he claims, is impossible.

Berkeley's claim here is initially quite puzzling. It seems that what the proponent of abstract ideas should say is that, if ideas should be regarded as genuine entities at all,¹⁸ then a distinction is to be drawn between the features they *have* and the features they *represent*. Locke, in fact, explicitly insists that although ideas are particular things, they nevertheless represent generally (EHU, §3.3.11).¹⁹ Furthermore, it is crucial to Locke's picture that, although every idea has the property *being an idea*, most ideas do not represent their objects as being ideas. The collection of features ideas *have* must obey all three of the principles, but (the abstractionist ought to say) the collection of features they *represent* needs to obey only (PNC). From the fact that an idea does not represent its object as *having* some property, it cannot be concluded that the idea represents its object as *lacking* that property. So, for instance, the abstract idea of *man* represents the property *being colored* without representing any particular color property, because all

18. Against ideas as entities, see Bennett 1971, §5; Yolton 1975; Mackie (1985) 1998. For criticisms of this 'de-ontologizing' strategy, see Ayers 1991, vol. 1, chs. 5-8; Hight 2008, §4.1, *et passim*.

19. C. C. W. Taylor misinterprets this section of Locke's *Essay* as an assertion of Berkeley's thesis that nothing can be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally (Taylor 1978, 106). Admittedly, Locke does say that the "general Nature" of ideas is "nothing but the Capacity they are put into by the Understanding, of signifying or representing many particulars" and that this is a "relation, that by the mind of Man is added to them." This, however, is not to deny that the mind, by the process of abstraction, makes for itself ideas which are intrinsically well-suited to represent in this way. One might suppose, for instance, that taking something as a sign of something else, rather than considering it for its own sake, is something the mind does but, once the mind determines to consider an idea as a sign, what the idea will represent is fully determined by its intrinsic nature. In fact, as Taylor notices (107-108), if Locke does not say that ideas can and words cannot be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally, then he has no reason for thinking that a general word must signify a general idea, rather than thinking, with Berkeley, that a general word signifies the many particulars in its extension directly.

of its objects are colored, but they are not all the same color. Of course, on this view, the idea does not represent the property *being colored* by *exemplifying* that property, for if it did then, by (DET), it would have to exemplify some determinate color property, and so would presumably represent all men as being the same color.

Although this seems to be the obviously correct approach, it is not available to anyone who holds that representation is by resemblance. For two objects to *resemble* or *be similar to* one another, they must have a property in common. This is so even in cases of inexact resemblance: for instance, if two objects are similarly colored, then they must both fit into a common color category (e.g. blue), even if they are not of precisely the same shade. Likewise, if two objects are similar in length, then there must be some range of lengths (e.g. between eight and ten inches) into which they both fall. Or, if objects are similar in shape or proportion, there must be some (reasonably natural) class of shapes, or range of proportions, into which they both fall.²⁰ If an idea is to represent an object by resembling it, then the idea and the object must have some features in common, and surely the relevant features are just those the idea represents the object as having (cf. Marusic 2009, 434).

If, however, ideas are real, determinate entities and they represent by resemblance, they will not be able to represent generally. Since there is nothing in the intrinsic nature of the idea to pick out some subset of its features as its representational content, it will represent only those objects which resemble it *exactly*, that is, those that share *all* of its features. For instance, if we consider again Locke's idea of a man seen through a thick

20. Contrary to Jacovides 1999, 468-469. Jacovides' gift shop Statue of Liberty shares with the real Statue of Liberty such properties as *being shaped like a woman holding a torch* and *being taller than it is wide*.

mist (LW, 4:221-222),²¹ we should ask why such a mental image would be a representation of the man rather than, say, the mist. Similarly, it could be a representation of gray, or of objects between four and seven feet tall. If an entity is fully determinate, as all entities must be, then resemblance alone cannot make that entity a representation of anything which does not resemble it *exactly*.

I argued in the previous chapter that Locke holds that ideas represent causally, and the Port-Royalists take representation as primitive, so that these considerations do not, strictly speaking, tell against them. However, Berkeley's argument is not therefore a strawman. As was mentioned above, Gassendi, for instance, held that ideas must resemble in order to represent (CSM, 2:186-191). Furthermore, Sergeant is in an even worse position than the resemblance theorist, for Sergeant insists not on resemblance but on *identity*. As we have seen, the 'identity' in question is the instantiation of the very same Aristotelian universal. So notions represent by having the feature they represent their objects as having. If notions are fully determinate entities, obeying (PEM), and they represent in this way, then every feature they do not represent their objects as having is a feature they represent their objects as lacking. Again, there will not be representation without *exact* resemblance. Furthermore, although Locke does not hold that simple ideas represent by resemblance, he still faces a similar issue, for he has what Martha Brandt Bolton calls a 'descriptive theory' of complex ideas (Bolton 2007, 70). That is, Locke holds that complex ideas represent what they do in virtue of the simple ideas they are made up of. For each feature a complex idea represents its object as having, it must contain the idea of that feature. However, Locke denies the existence of negative ideas, holding that negative words signify the absence of positive ideas (EHU, §3.1.4). Thus

21. It should be noted that Locke says that this is an example of an *obscure and confused* idea, not of an abstract idea, but it is supposed to be analogous to the case of the idea of substance, which is not only obscure and confused but also highly abstract.

he would seem to be committed to the claim that a complex idea represents its object as lacking some feature simply by failing to include the idea of that feature. But if this is so, then we are back to the same problem: for any given feature and any complex idea, the complex idea either includes or excludes the idea of that feature, so that it represents its objects either as having or as lacking that feature. Thus the ‘description’ included in the content of the idea must be *complete*.

Once this approach is accepted, allowing violations of the three principles would in fact not help. If representation involves *exact* resemblance or *complete* description, and the idea of man was colored without having any particular color (or included the idea of color without including the idea of any particular color), then it would represent its object as being colored without having any particular color. But of course no such bizarre entity could possibly be a man (cf. Stoneham 2002, 232).

Kenneth Winkler has suggested a way of interpreting the ‘selective attention’ aspect of Locke’s thought about abstraction which, he says, is likely Locke’s actual view, and which escapes Berkeley’s arguments (Winkler 1989, 41-43, 46). According to Winkler, Locke’s use of ‘idea’ is ambiguous between the *object* of thought (Locke’s official definition; see EHU, §1.1.8) and the *act* of thinking.²² For Winkler’s Locke, to have an abstract idea is not really to have an idea of a particular kind, but to have an idea in a particular way. A similar account is developed in more detail by Michael Ayers (Ayers 1991, 1:248-253, 259-263).

Interpretively speaking, Winkler’s proposal is problematic since even the Port-Royalists, who, unlike Locke, explicitly and consistently adopt a selective attention model of abstraction, take selective attention to be a process whereby a new idea is formed. They write,

22. The same complaint about Locke’s usage is made by Sergeant 1697, 142.

Suppose, for example, I reflect that I am thinking, and, in consequence, that I am the I who thinks. In my idea of the I who thinks, *I can consider a thinking thing without noticing that it is I*, although in me the I and the one who thinks are one and the same thing. *The idea I thereby conceive* of a person who thinks can represent not only me but all other thinking persons. By the same token, if I draw an equilateral triangle on a piece of paper, and if I concentrate on examining it on this paper along with all the accidental circumstances determining it, I shall have an idea of only a single triangle. But if I *ignore all the particular circumstances* and focus on the thought that the triangle is a figure bounded by three equal lines, *the idea I form* will, on the one hand, represent more clearly the equality of lines and, on the other, be able to represent all equilateral triangles (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 38, emphasis added).

In *On True and False Ideas*, Arnauld is even more explicit:

The philosopher Thales, having to pay twenty workers one drachma each, counted twenty drachmas and paid each worker. He would not have been able to do this unless there were at least two perceptions in his mind: one of twenty men and one of twenty drachmas ... Having some spare time he began to reflect, and thinking about what the two *perceptions* or *ideas* have in common, namely that there is 20 in both, he abstracts from what is particular in them the abstract idea of the number 20 ... This is a third idea or perception (Arnauld [1683] 1990, 74).

Here, partial consideration, or ignoring particular circumstances, is clearly seen as part of a procedure whereby a new type of idea is ‘conceived’ or ‘formed.’ Ayers explicitly says that Locke’s selective attention account is “reminiscent of the Port Royal *Logic*”

(Ayers 1991, 1:251), but does not recognize that the Port-Royalists clearly regard abstraction as a procedure for constructing new ideas.

If we interpret those passages where Locke discusses selective attention (e.g. EHU, §§2.7.9, 2.13.13) as endorsing a theory like the one adopted by the Port-Royalists, then those passages need not be taken to be at odds with the passages where he clearly seems to think of abstract ideas as a distinct kind of object of thought (e.g. §§3.3.6, 4.7.9). A consistent interpretation of Locke's thought on abstraction is possible if we take Locke to hold that selective attention is part of a process whereby new ideas are formed.

Ayers argues against this type of view by pointing to passages like §2.13.13, where Locke writes, "a partial consideration is not a separating. A Man may consider ... Mobility in Body without its Extension, without thinking of their separation" (Ayers 1991, 1:251). Ayers evidently thinks that this passage shows that the abstract idea of mobility is really an idea of a mobile, extended body, in which only the mobility is considered by the mind. This, however, badly distorts Locke, as can be seen by considering the very next sentence: "One is only a partial Consideration, terminating in one alone; and the other is a Consideration of both, as existing separately" (EHU, §2.13.13). In other words, when Locke says that we cannot mentally separate the mobility of body from its extension, he is *not* claiming that we cannot think of mobility without also thinking of extension; he is rather claiming that we cannot think of mobility and extension as separate.

In fact, there is no way of interpreting Locke consistently on this point without attributing to him more than one use of the word 'separating.' Locke says explicitly that abstraction is a separating of ideas (§3.3.6), and also that it is not a separating of ideas (§2.13.13). Since, in §2.13.13, Locke says that the separation he is talking about "is a Consideration of both, as existing separately," it makes sense to connect this with

another collection of texts in which Locke speaks of ‘separation’ of ideas. These are the texts in which Locke uses the term ‘separation’ for the mental act of *denial* (EHU, §4.5.6). If this is what Locke intends in §2.13.13, then he would be saying that to separate in the mind the mobility of body from its extension is mentally to deny extension of a mobile body, or, in other words, to believe the proposition that *a body is mobile but not extended*. This, according to Locke, is psychologically impossible, because the mind immediately, intuitively perceives the agreement of the idea of body with both mobility and extension, and this sort of knowledge is involuntary (§4.13.1). According to §2.13.13, what we *can* do is think of a mobile body without thinking of it as extended. We do this by means of an abstract idea which includes mobility but not extension. What we *cannot* do is think of a mobile body as unextended. If this latter task were possible it would involve conceiving the two ideas of *mobile body* and *extension* as separated.

Berkeley’s arguments are directed against the view that there is some special class of entities which, *by their very nature*, represent generally. It is therefore true that, if the Winkler-Ayers interpretation were correct, Berkeley’s arguments would not touch Locke. Berkeley is, however, still in disagreement with the Winkler-Ayers Locke:²³ according to Winkler and Ayers, Locke holds that general thought involves *having* an idea in a particular way. Berkeley, by contrast, holds that general thought involves *using* an idea in a particular way. On this interpretation, Locke claims to have the ability to get into a *static condition* of having an idea in a general way, whereas according to Berkeley general thought can occur only in the context of a process of manipulating ideas according to rules (see §3.1, below). Berkeley will thus reject the view Winkler and Ayers offer on Locke’s behalf on the basis of the phenomenological appeal. The

23. Contrary to Ayers 1991, 1:150-151.

arguments for the uselessness of abstract ideas, to be discussed below, also gain traction against the Winkler-Ayers Locke.

Central to the reading of Berkeley I have defended is what Martha Brandt Bolton calls Berkeley's theory of 'idea-objects.' According to this view, ideas are fully determinate individual entities which are not intrinsically 'of' anything other than themselves (Bolton 1987, 68-69; cf. N, §§660, 843). Critics of this view have claimed that it would involve Berkeley in 'circular reasoning' (Muehlmann 1992, 54) or make "the argument for idealism . . . just too easy" (Rickless 2013, 113). These criticisms stem from two features of Bolton's view: first, her claim that the theory of idea-objects is, for Berkeley, 'fundamental' (Bolton 1987, 68) and, second, her claim that Berkeley's theory of idea-objects is the basis for his argument for idealism (73-76). The objection against Bolton's view is that the theory of idea-objects is much too closely connected to idealism to play the role of a fundamental assumption to be used as the basis of an argument for idealism.

This objection against Bolton's 'idea-object' interpretation is mistaken in two ways. First, when Bolton says that Berkeley's theory of idea-objects is 'fundamental' she does not mean that Berkeley is not in a position to give reasons in its favor, reasons to which the materialist is obligated to give some weight. Second, idealism does not fall out of the theory of idea-objects so trivially as Bolton's detractors suppose. Both of these points can, as I will now proceed to show, be seen in Bolton's original essay.

As to the first point, Bolton says that Berkeley's theory of idea-objects was "motivated, at least in part, by obscurities in the established view that ideas have intrinsic representational contents" (75). These 'obscurities' are closely related to what Winkler calls "Berkeley's explanatory challenge" (Winkler 1989, 45-48). The Way of Ideas, as Berkeley sees it, is meant to be an explanatory account of human thought. It is supposed to begin from some fundamental building blocks and a small set of operations we can

perform on them and by this means explain how we manage to perform all of the cognitive tasks we in fact perform. If the basic materials from which such a program begins are even more in need of explanation than the phenomena they are supposed to explain, then the program has failed. Berkeley believes that this is the case with the process of abstraction and the abstract ideas which are meant to result from it. The process and its results are, Berkeley thinks, not merely mysterious but impossible. The impossibility, however, comes from Berkeley's *own* theory of ideas (the theory of idea-objects), which his opponents need not endorse. The fundamental point is this: Berkeley takes ideas of the sort he believes in, namely, mental images, to be paradigmatically unmysterious entities. They are easily discovered introspectively, and their natures are utterly transparent to us (PHK, §25; cf. EHU, §2.29.5).²⁴ However, to suppose that ideas of *this* sort could be abstract leads to absurdities, and no one has been able to explain adequately what an idea of any other type would be. In other words, Berkeley's theory of idea-objects is 'fundamental' in the sense that he does not attempt to offer any explicit, deductive argument for it. However, it *is* supported by reasons. The key reason is the mysteriousness of the alternatives. Until Berkeley's opponents can either de-mystify their theories or show that there is no way to explain the phenomena without mysterious entities, it does seem that there is good reason to prefer Berkeley's assumptions to theirs.

As to the second point, Muehlmann characterizes Bolton's interpretation as attributing to Berkeley the fundamental assumption that "it is impossible to distinguish between ideas and their objects" (Muehlmann 1992, 54). Similarly, Rickless writes: "consider a situation in which I am looking at, and so have an idea of, a table T. It is an immediate consequence of the claim that my idea of T is identical to T that T is itself an idea"

24. This is not to say that there are no puzzles about ideas of this sort at all. For a book-length treatment of the metaphysical problems faced by early modern idea theorists, with heavy emphasis on Berkeley, see Hight 2008.

(Rickless 2013, 114). This, however, mischaracterizes Bolton's view, by missing a distinction which is crucial, both to Berkeley and to Bolton: "Although the intrinsic object of an idea is just the idea itself, Berkeley holds that an idea can *come* to represent something else" (Bolton 1987, 68). Berkeley's view is that it is no part of the *intrinsic nature* of an idea to represent anything which is not *exactly* like it, hence an idea *intrinsically* represents (is 'the idea of') only itself. However, this does not trivially rule out materialism, for the materialist may hold that the idea represents some non-idea *extrinsically*, or, in Berkeley's terms, that the idea *signifies* a non-idea. This, according to Berkeley, *actually happens* when we think of spirits and their actions (see below, §§6.4-6.5). Furthermore, it is not a trivial consequence of the theory of idea-objects that there are no mind-independent triangles. According to Bolton, "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). This is to say that *all triangle ideas are triangles*. This, however, does *not* (by itself) entail that *all triangles are triangle ideas*.²⁵

Thus a materialist who accepts the theory of idea-objects would appear to have the following path open to her: she could hold that although triangle ideas are intrinsically 'of' only themselves, they *signify* mind-independent material triangles. This signification relation might arise, for instance, from resemblance or causation. These possibilities are not ruled out by the theory of idea-objects alone.

Since Berkeley has reasons for the theory of idea-objects which can be appreciated by the materialist, and the theory of idea-objects does not trivially entail the falsity of materialism, an interpretation which has Berkeley using that theory as the basis for an

25. In my view – though I cannot speak for Bolton – it is a mistake on Rickless's part to use a table as an example. This is because, in my view, no idea is a table, hence no idea is intrinsically 'of' a table. See below, §6.3. This, however, does not affect any of the essential points made by either side, all of which are just as easily made using Bolton's triangle example.

argument for idealism does not convict Berkeley of begging the question against his materialist opponents. In fact, because of the complexity and sophistication of Berkeley's understanding of signification, and in particular the difficulties involved in securing the meaningfulness of the discourses of physics, on the one hand, and theology, on the other, while still ruling out talk of matter, Berkeley's path from the theory of idea-objects to idealism turns out to be quite complicated. It is, indeed, sufficiently complicated that we will not arrive at idealism until the end of chapter 6.

My conclusion is that Berkeley's theory of idea-objects should be regarded as *ceteris paribus* preferable to the various non-Berkeleyian theories of human thought on offer, such as the 'ideist' theories of the Port-Royalists and Locke, or Sergeant's Aristotelian theory. But the *ceteris paribus* is important here: if Berkeley cannot explain human thought at least as well as his competitors, then abstract ideas, however bizarre they may be, will have to be accepted to save the phenomena. For this reason, Berkeley goes on, in the succeeding sections of the Introduction, to present a two-pronged attack. He argues both that abstract ideas cannot explain the phenomena they were meant to explain, and that those phenomena can be explained with his own sparser resources (cf. Flage 1986, 496-498). The latter task is, of course, of central importance to the present study, since it is here that Berkeley begins to develop his novel theory of language. However, before examining Berkeley's positive theory, we shall consider Berkeley's arguments for the uselessness of abstract ideas, as well as two strategies for escaping Berkeley's anti-abstractionist arguments.

2.2.3 The Uselessness of Abstract Ideas

Abstract ideas, Berkeley says, were posited primarily to explain two phenomena: the existence of meaningful general terms in language (PHK, Intro §§11-14; MI, §§16-23),

and the possibility of general knowledge (PHK, Intro §§15-17; MI, §§24-29). Berkeley argues that abstract ideas, if they existed, would be “of no use for those ends to which they are thought necessary” (PHK, Intro §21), that is, that they could not explain the phenomena in question.

Berkeley gives two reasons for supposing that abstract ideas cannot explain the meaningfulness of general terms. The first is that the theory of abstract ideas does not provide an adequate account of what it is for a proposition to be general.

The Newtonian claim that “the change of motion is proportional to the impressed force” is general in the sense that “whatever motion I consider, whether it be swift or slow, perpendicular, horizontal or oblique, or in whatever object, the axiom concerning it holds equally true” (Intro §11). According to the Port-Royalists and Locke, the proposition that the change of motion is proportional to the impressed force is formed in the mind by affirming the complex abstract idea of *being proportional to the impressed force* of the abstract idea of *change in motion*. What Berkeley wants to know is how it comes about that that proposition is *about* particular observed changes in motion. Locke’s answer is that any particular observed change in motion ‘agrees with’ the abstract idea of change in motion. We notice this sort of matching between the abstract idea and the observed particular and therefore predicate of the particular whatever we had previously predicated of the abstract idea. Berkeley, however, does not believe that the abstract idea is actually doing any explanatory work in this story. What goes on in the case is this: I’ve got a certain *sentence of English*, ‘the change in motion is proportional to the impressed force.’ I see a particular phenomenon and recognize it as a change in motion, which is to say, as an element of the extension of the English phrase ‘change in motion’ which occurred in my sentence. I therefore predicate *de re* of that phenomenon that *it*

is proportional to the impressed force. What is it that the abstract idea in Locke's story was doing that the English phrase 'change in motion' can't?

Locke's answer is that the abstract idea serves as a sort of template against which to match phenomena to see if they are indeed changes in motion (EHU, §§3.3.14-19). This, however, is precisely the feature of abstract ideas which is so puzzling. Berkeley makes the point more simply, using a different example, in the *Manuscript Introduction*: that the interior angles sum to 180° is universally true of particular triangles, not true of some mysterious entity, The Universal Triangle (MI, §24).

The difficulty Berkeley poses here is essentially the same as one expressed by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a signpost telling us which way to go. Of course, in order to follow the instructions, we have to know the convention about signposts, namely, that they tell you to go in the direction the arrow points. Adding more signposts, Wittgenstein insists, will never fully disambiguate the meaning of the original signpost so that it can be used by someone who doesn't know the convention (Wittgenstein 1953, §1.85). Similarly, in order to use a lookup table, you must know that it is a lookup table, and that lookup tables are read straight across (§1.86).

Suppose that the abstract idea of man were a list of features an entity had to have to be a man. The list might contain the ideas *rational* and *animal*. What is one meant to *do* with this list? Evidently, one is meant to match it up with all those things that have the listed qualities, regardless of what other qualities they may or may not have. But one needs this rule in order to use the abstract idea. So now, in order to use the word, we need both the abstract idea and a rule for the use of the abstract idea in connection with the word. It seems, however, that we could just as easily have connected a rule directly to the *word* without making use of the intervening abstract idea. That is, we could simply adopt the rule of applying the word 'man' to all and only those things that

are both rational and animals. This is, essentially, Berkeley's own solution (see §3.1, below).²⁶

If abstract ideas are not helpful in explaining general terms, perhaps they will be thought to be more helpful in explaining general knowledge. In Berkeley's time it was still widely held, following Aristotle, that all genuine or 'scientific' knowledge (Lat. *scientia*; Gr. ἐπιστήμη) is universal (PHK, Intro §15). To know something in this strong sense was to grasp its nature and be able to deduce a variety of conclusions from that nature. A 'nature' is here understood as a universal. The paradigm case of such 'scientific' knowledge was Euclidean geometry. The Euclidean definitions and axioms were thought to explicate the nature of *figure* or *extension*, and Euclidean geometry is a collection of deductions from those definitions and axioms.

For Sergeant, taking a more strictly Aristotelian line, the universal nature is a real thing literally present in the mind and the deductions proceed from it. For the Cartesians, we must instead apprehend the 'true and immutable nature' of the thing by pure reason so that we have an idea in the mind which is a sort of copy of that nature (CSM, 2:44-45). For Locke, we can only have this sort of knowledge in cases where our abstract idea *just is* the nature of the thing, which is to say, in the case of mixed modes. This is the case with the geometric natures (EHU, §§2.31.3, 4.4.5-6).

Berkeley's objection here is essentially the same as his objection to the use of abstract ideas to explain the meaningfulness of general terms. The question is "how we can know any proposition to be true of all particular triangles" in the absence of "a particular demonstration for every particular triangle, which is impossible." The answer is supposed to be that the abstract idea (or universal nature) includes only those features "in which all the particulars do indifferently partake" (PHK, Intro §16). But, of course,

26. Jonathan Bennett raises this objection against Locke's theory, but doesn't seem to recognize its connections to Berkeley (Bennett 1971, 24-25).

in order to carry out the proof and thereby come to know something about all triangles, one needs to know that the features included in the abstract idea, the features one was using, are only the features common to all triangles. Once one knows this, what useful role is the abstract idea playing? One could just as easily use some particular triangle and make sure that the proof appeals only to the correct features (PHK, Intro §16). Furthermore, one need not use a ‘triangular idea’ in the course of performing the proof at all: it suffices to know what features are common to all triangles and deduce the conclusion from one or more of those features.²⁷

Note that these arguments are not escaped by the Winkler-Ayers interpretation which says that Locke takes abstraction to involve having a particular idea in a certain way by selectively attending to certain of its features (cf. Roberts 2007, 56-58). We can think of this, rather crudely, as involving certain features of the idea (the features common to all triangles) having a certain phenomenological ‘glow’ which singles them out from the rest of the features. This sort of ‘glow’ will not solve the problems just discussed, for one must still know what to do with the ‘glowing’ features. As a result, the having of such an idea in such a way will not be a mental state which, in virtue of its intrinsic nature, represents generally. General representation can occur only in the context of an ongoing cognitive process which proceeds according to certain rules. Once this is admitted, however, there is nothing left for abstraction to explain which cannot be explained just as well or better without it.

27. The ideas of these features are, of course, further general ideas, so Berkeley needs to show that the reduction can be carried out without circularity or regress. Berkeley’s attempt to do this will be discussed in §3.1, below.

2.3 Causal Representation

Berkeley argues that no entity could be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally, and he wants to infer from this that ideas represent only in virtue of how they are used by the mind. In the next section, we will consider a last-ditch effort to save intrinsic representation; here I want to consider an attempt to find a *via media* between the position Berkeley attacks and the position he endorses. This position would claim, contrary to the alleged result of the phenomenological appeal, that ideas have their representative content independent of their use in a train of thought, while denying that they have this content intrinsically. The view I have in mind is a certain variety of *causal theory* of mental representation. I will argue, however, that the apparent middle ground here is unstable: causal theories which claim that the representative content of ideas is independent of the use to which the mind puts those ideas face a variety of serious objections which they are unable to answer. Any plausible causal theory will amount to what we might describe as an *externalist use theory* of representation (as opposed to the internalist use theory I will be attributing to Berkeley). These theories hold, with Berkeley, that ideas get their representational content by being used by the mind according to certain rules; however they hold, against Berkeley, that these rules may refer to circumstances which are outside the agent and to which the agent has no independent epistemic access. Berkeley does need to rule out these views if his argument for immaterialism is to succeed (see §5.2 and ch. 6, below); however, the existence of these views does not challenge the success of the argument about language in the Introduction to the *Principles*.

I argued in §1.3 that Locke endorses a causal theory of representation, so Locke's text is a reasonable place to begin our discussion. However, as we shall see, the key text for Locke's causal theory of representation shows that he has muddled together

several quite distinct ways in which ideas might represent in virtue of their causes. I shall not attempt to sort out this muddle or identify some particular theory as Locke's considered view, nor will I attempt to harmonize what Locke says in this text with what he says elsewhere. Instead, I will simply use Locke's text as a jumping-off point for a discussion of the philosophical issue of whether a causal theory can be used to escape Berkeley's arguments. In the ensuing philosophical discussion, I will show how attempts to solve a variety of difficulties faced by any theory of the general sort Locke describes will force that theory into a shape that looks more like the recent approach which Jerry Fodor has dubbed 'Wisconsin semantics' (Fodor 1984). Finally, I will argue that this sort of 'Wisconsin' causal theory is really a variety of use theory.

The principal support for attributing a causal theory of representation to Locke is his argument that all simple ideas are 'real' (i.e. veridical). Locke writes:

Our *simple Ideas are all real*, all agree to the reality of things. Not that they are all Images, or Representations of what does exist, the contrary whereof, in all but the primary Qualities of Bodies, hath already been shewed. But though Whiteness and Coldness are no more in Snow, than Pain is; yet those *Ideas* of Whiteness, and Coldness, Pain, *etc.* being in us the Effects of Powers in Things without us, ordained by our Maker, to produce in us such Sensations; they are real *Ideas* in us, whereby we distinguish the Qualities, that are really in things themselves. For these several Appearances, being designed to be the Marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with; our *Ideas* do as well serve us to that purpose, and are real distinguishing Characters, whether they be only constant Effects, or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves: the reality

lying in that steady correspondence, they have with the distinct Constitutions of real beings. But whether they answer to those Constitutions, as to Causes, or Patterns, it matters not; it suffices that they are constantly produced by them. And thus our simple *Ideas* are all real and true, because they answer and agree to those Powers of Things, which produce them in our Minds, that being all that is requisite to make them real, and not fictions at Pleasure. For in simple *Ideas*, (as has been shewn,) the Mind is wholly confined to the Operation of things upon it.; and can make to it self no simple *Ideas*, more than what it has received (EHU, §2.30.2).

A terminological note is in order as to the second sentence of this quotation. Locke there uses the word ‘representation’ in a narrow sense, to refer only to what literally re-presents something, i.e. presents it again, by being a copy or resemblance of it (cf. LW, 4:75). Berkeley also sometimes uses the word in this narrow sense (see Winkler 1989, 14-21).²⁸ I will, nevertheless, continue using that word in the broad sense in which philosophers typically use it today. In this sense, an idea represents whatever it is *of* or *about*. Locke clearly holds that secondary quality ideas are ideas *of* certain features of bodies.

In this passage, Locke argues for the claim that every simple idea represents a feature that is instantiated somewhere in the world; that is, no simple idea is purely fictitious in the way the complex idea of a unicorn is. Locke argues as follows. Since there are no innate ideas, every idea must have come into the mind at some time; that is, there must have been some time at which the mind *changed* from not having that idea to having it. But no change can occur except through the exercise of some power capable of bringing

28. However, contrary to Winkler, Berkeley does not *always* use the word in this narrow sense. See, e.g., MI, §20; NTV, §143; Alc, §7.11.

about that change (EHU, §2.21.4). Now, the mind “can make to it self no [new] simple *Ideas*,” so the power which brings it about that the mind has a new simple idea must be outside the mind. What the simple idea represents is this power, and the very fact that the mind has the simple idea guarantees that this power exists outside the mind.

Although the latter part of the section suggests a more sophisticated theory, which will be discussed in a moment, this argument suggests a very simple theory of representation. According to this theory, each simple idea must come into the mind from the outside at some time, and whatever caused that original idea token is what ideas of that type represent for the rest of that mind’s existence.

This theory is indeed the sort of middle way we are seeking, since it holds that ideas represent by having a certain causal history independent of how they are used by the mind. Having this causal history is, of course, an extrinsic feature. The theory also explains how the idea comes to represent a particular feature of the object rather than the object as a whole: it is by the exercise of a certain power that the object causes the idea, and the idea therefore represents just this power of the object, and not any of its other features. The theory also deals with a pressing problem faced by certain other causal theories, namely, how misrepresentation is possible (Fodor 1984, 234; Dretske [1994] 2000, 213-216). On this view, the simple idea could misrepresent in either of two ways: first, it could be caused by a different power than the one it represents. Second, the mind could use this idea in thought or imagination to represent the power in question as existing somewhere other than where it in fact exists.

Unfortunately, the very feature which generates this solution also gives rise to a very serious problem for this simple theory: systematic misrepresentation can occur far too easily. For instance, if a healthy infant with a perfectly normal visual system is born in a room with white walls and a red light bulb, then the idea which for us represents red will,

for the rest of that infant's life, represent white for it. Since its visual system is perfectly normal, it has the red idea under all the same circumstances as we do. However, the mental state that it gets in those circumstances will represent white rather than red. As a result, it will end up thinking all red things are white.²⁹

Another famous problem for causal theories is also faced by the simple Lockean view under discussion. This is the problem of intermediate causes (Grice 1961, 142-144). In Locke's terminology, we may say that a red object has the power to change the behavior of light in certain ways, and the light has the power to effect the eye in a certain way, and the eye has the power to effect the optic nerve in a certain way, and so forth. Now, in fact, we *do* describe the light and the retinal image as 'red,' but the signal on the optic nerve is certainly not red. Furthermore, the red object may have been made red by something that is not itself red; for instance the red object may be iron and water may have caused it to rust. Although the water is not red, it has a power to cause red ideas in me; it can do so by making iron objects become red. There will be a causal chain of this sort every time I perceive a red idea by sense, and therefore there will be such a causal chain in my initial acquisition of the idea. If this is the case, however, then it is not clear how the idea can become a representation of one of these powers rather than another.

The latter part of Locke's discussion may be helpful with respect to these difficulties. There, Locke speaks of a "steady correspondence . . . with the distinct Constitutions of real beings." Some more complex correlation might be thought to solve, or at least mitigate, these problems. However, it is not clear how Locke's argument can guarantee a 'steady correspondence.' The argument I have described appears to guarantee only

29. As Samuel Rickless pointed out to me, since Locke holds that there are no colors in the dark (EHU, §§2.8.19, 2.23.11; see Rickless 1997, 305-309), he presumably also thinks that things which are normally white are *actually* red, rather than falsely appearing red, under red light. However, if Locke allows that the idea of red can ever be caused by anything other than the quality redness (for instance, if he allows that there can be phenomenally red hallucinations), then a similar, though perhaps more complicated, case can be constructed.

that each token of a given idea is brought about by some power. Locke may be attempting to get around this difficulty by appealing to some sort of uniformity of nature thesis when he says that our ideas are “the Effects of Powers in Things without us, ordained by our Maker, to produce in us such sensations.” However, solving the above difficulty in this way without departing from the simple theory would require ruling out aberrantly caused perceptions. Aberrantly caused perceptions do sometimes occur, so any uniformity thesis which will do the needed work is false.

One response to this line of argument would be to admit that Locke’s claim that all simple ideas are necessarily ‘real’ is too strong, for there is a way a simple idea could fail to be real, namely, by not having a “steady correspondence . . . with the distinct Constitutions of real beings.” On this kind of view, a simple idea would represent the unique objective feature of the world of which it is a reliable indicator and, if there is no such feature, would be (in Locke’s terminology) ‘fantastical’ rather than ‘real,’ which is to say, essentially, that it would fail to refer.

One may, of course, worry about the skeptical consequences of this theory. However, it faces an even more serious problem. It seems possible that some of our simple ideas could represent *disjunctive* features of the world.³⁰ Consider the rather mundane case of red-green color blindness. In this case, it seems that we should not say that the individual’s visual system misrepresents red as being green, or misrepresents green as being red, but that the visual system uses one idea to represent objects as *being either green or red*. The representation of objects as green-or-red is precisely as reliable as a normal perceiver’s representation of this disjunctive property; it is only in distinguishing between green and red that the color blind individual suffers any disability. However, once we admit the possibility of disjunctive representation, we have a serious problem:

30. In fact, John Campbell has argued that, for Locke, all secondary quality ideas represent disjunctive features of the world (Campbell [1980] 1998).

given that nature is to some degree lawful, there will be some massively disjunctive property which *exactly* describes all the ways the idea can be caused. The idea will then represent *this* property, and misrepresentation will be impossible (Fodor 1984, 241-242; Dretske [1994] 2000, 214, 220-222).

In the text we have been considering, there is a hint of another strategy, which might mitigate this difficulty. Locke says that the “several Appearances [were] designed to be the Marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with.” In other words, he appeals to the *purpose* for which these powers were “ordained by our Maker, to produce in us such sensations.” (This can also be seen as a hint in the direction of Berkeley’s divine language theory. See chapter 8.) Although there is certainly no appeal to God, the claim that the *purpose* or *aim* of a symbol, the *role* it plays in the functioning of the organism, is critical to its content is the central element in the Wisconsin semanticists’ response to this problem as well (Fodor 1984, 243-248; Dretske [1994] 2000, 216-226). The view here is that some state of an organism comes to be reliably (if imperfectly) correlated with something that organism “has to do with,” i.e. something the organism has a practical need for information about. Through either an evolutionary process or a learning process, the state then takes on the *function* of conveying needed information to the organism.

Here, however, we no longer have the *via media* we were seeking; instead, Berkeley’s point has been conceded. It is in virtue of the complex rules governing the tokening of that state within the organism that the state has the content it does. The Wisconsin semanticists differ from Berkeley only in having an externalist view of the rules in question. The organism aims to follow a rule of the form *token state-type S when and only when external circumstance C obtains*. A person cannot, of course, consciously adopt this as a goal, since the person knows (or believes) that *C* obtains only by being in

state *S*. However, there are thought to be sub-personal purposive systems in the human organism, and *these* systems have this aim. Thus the person is able to represent the circumstance because her perceptual apparatus follows a certain rule, and this despite the fact that she may not know the rule, and even if she did it would be impossible for her to follow it consciously or intentionally. Berkeley *does* reject this view in favor of an internalist conception of the rules governing mental and verbal signs,³¹ but his reasons for rejecting it are not to be found in the arguments of the Introduction, and so further discussion of this view will be postponed to later chapters. Here we may simply conclude that the causal theory does not provide any middle ground between the intrinsic representation theories Berkeley attacks and use theories of representation, such as the one he endorses.

2.4 Primitive Representation

If Berkeley's conclusion is accepted, it seems that there is no alternative to the adoption of some sort of use theory about mental and linguistic representation. However, as we have seen, the argument depends on what Winkler calls "Berkeley's explanatory challenge," that is, the assumption that we are looking for some sort of reductive explanation of representation. As Winkler notes, some abstractionists may regard their claim as purely *descriptive* rather than explanatory (Winkler 1989, 45-46). Such a philosopher might take representation as primitive, denying that it is the sort of thing that admits of explanation.

31. However, as we shall see, Berkeley does *not* hold that the individual must be able to articulate explicitly the rule she is following. He is an 'internalist' about the rules only in the sense that the circumstances to which the rules refer – that is, the circumstance in which a rule instructs us to perform an action – must be accessible to the agent. This corresponds roughly to what, in epistemology, William Alston has called 'internalist externalism' (Alston 1988). On rule-following in Berkeley's theory of language, see ch. 5, below.

This approach is suggested by the assertion in the first chapter of the Port-Royal *Logic* that “The word ‘idea’ is one of those that are so clear that they cannot be explained by others, because none is more clear and simple” (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 25). The Port-Royalists go on to argue against imagism, which they take to be an unsuccessful attempt at reductive explanation of mental representation. Furthermore, as we have seen (§1.2), the primitivist approach is endorsed quite explicitly by Arnauld in later writings. Arnauld’s view (and likely also the view of his collaborators) is that idea-perceptions are *sui generis* mental acts, distinct from sensations and images, whose nature is to represent.

This kind of view must take the property *representing redness* to be utterly distinct from the property *redness*. In doing so, it is able to avoid the difficulties raised in Berkeley’s argument against the possibility of abstract ideas. Berkeley’s argument hinged on the claim that the abstract idea of, e.g., *apple* can neither have nor lack the property *redness*, for if it has that property it will represent its objects (i.e. *all* apples) as red, but if it lacks that property, it will represent its objects as non-red. Furthermore, since all apples are colored, the abstract idea of apple ought to be colored, yet it can’t be any particular color, since not all apples are the same color. On the primitivist view, these problems do not arise, for the negation of *representing redness* is *not representing redness*, which is a completely different feature from *representing non-redness*. Thus the abstract idea of *apple* can obey the three logical principles (PNC), (PEM), and (DET) (see above, p. 66). The idea will not itself be colored, and therefore (DET) does not require it to have a particular color. It will not be red, nor will it represent either redness or non-redness. There is thus no property which it must neither have nor lack, nor is there any property it must both have and lack. Finally, it will have the property *representing coloredness*. However, this property should not be regarded as a determinable.

There is, however, a very deep puzzle about this view, and that is the puzzle of just how a representational property (e.g. *representing redness*) is related to the property it represents (e.g. *redness*) (cf. Chisholm 1982, 40-42). This is analogous to the problem of how the primitivist (‘magical’ or ‘unsound’³²) theory of the representational content of propositions can explain the ‘makes true’ relation which can obtain, and be known to obtain, between the world and a particular proposition (Van Inwagen 1986, 202-207; cf. D. Lewis 1986, §3.4). According to the view under consideration, the property *representing redness* is a simple, primitive property utterly distinct from *redness*, but it must of course be somehow *related* to redness, for redness is the thing that it represents. There is not, of course, any sort of *contradiction* here; merely a mystery.

Sergeant and the Aristotelian tradition may in fact be able to do better in this respect, by introducing, rather than indefinitely many primitive categorical properties, a single primitive relation. I earlier asserted, on the basis of Sergeant’s claim that having a notion involves the presence of a universal in the mind, that Sergeant was a resemblance theorist, that is, that he held that in order to think of redness, one must have a red thing in one’s mind. But another interpretation, which might be regarded as more charitable, is possible. Sergeant says that “when that [corporeo-spiritual] Part is affected after its peculiar Nature, *Corporeally*; the Soul is affected after *its* Nature, that is, *Spiritually*, or *Knowingly*” (Sergeant 1697, 66). Perhaps what Sergeant intends is that a red object, like an apple, bears one relation to the universal *redness*, and to have a notion of redness is for the soul to bear *a different relation* to that same universal.³³ If this is what

32. David Lewis had dubbed the view which takes possible worlds to be abstract objects and takes their representational content as primitive ‘magical ersatzism’ (D. Lewis 1986, 141). Regarding this terminological choice, Peter van Inwagen declares, “I will not accept this dyslogistic name for the position I propose to defend. I will call it *Unsound* Abstractionism, which is an acronym for Unscientific Naive Superstitious Obscurantist Unenlightened Neanderthal Dogmatic Abstractionism” (Van Inwagen 1986, 201).

33. This is also a possible interpretation of Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Iq84a1.

Sergeant intends, then he can at least explain how my representation is related to the apple: the redness the apple *instantiates* is the very same universal as the redness my soul *perceives*. These relations can both be taken as primitive.

In addition to requiring the introduction of a new primitive relation, this view has the cost of committing one to realism about universals, a cost most early moderns would be unwilling to pay. However, it does have an answer to the difficulty faced by the theory I have attributed to the Port-Royalists as to the nature of the relation between the idea and the feature it represents. Furthermore, this theory would only posit a single primitive relation, rather than needing to posit indefinitely many primitive properties.

In any event, it must be admitted that either of these primitivist theories can escape Berkeley's criticisms and rescue abstract ideas (or Sergeant's notions). The cost is the introduction of a new primitive. Note, however, that these theories do not do away with any of Berkeley's primitives: the Port-Royalists accept "images formed in the brain" (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 25), and Sergeant accepts 'phantasms.' If, therefore, Berkeley can explain all the phenomena with his sparser resources, this will be a significant advantage for his theory.

2.5 Conclusion

The Introduction to the *Principles* is an attack on meanings. That is, it is an attack on the view that words get to be meaningful by being 'linked up,' by convention, with some special class of entities, which can then be referred to as the meanings of those words (see Figure 1.1, page 15). The core of Berkeley's attack on this doctrine is his argument against abstract ideas. That argument is meant to show that no object could possibly be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally, and so that the kind of non-conventional

linkage which the Theory of Meanings imagines between meanings and objects is impossible. In order to show this, he considers how the proponents of abstraction describe the ideas we form by this process. In addition to noting that he cannot discover any such ideas in introspection, Berkeley argues that such ideas are in fact impossible, and that, even if there were such things, they would still not be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally.

I have given a qualified defense of this argument. Abstract ideas would be bizarre and mysterious entities, and converting them to logical rather than psychological entities would not make them any less so. They can, in the end, be saved only by the introduction of new primitives; parsimony requires that we not introduce such primitives unless the phenomena force us to do so. What remains to be seen is whether the phenomena *do* force us to do so, that is, whether Berkeley can adequately explain our mental activities using mental images alone.

Chapter 3

The Rudiments of Berkeley's Positive

Theory

So far we have been focused on the negative project of the Introduction to the *Principles*, where Berkeley criticized the Theory of Meanings. I have concluded that Berkeley's arguments show that we have strong reason to prefer a theory of the sort he wants to offer, provided that such a theory can account for the phenomena (cf. Flage 1986, 496-498). Beginning as early as the notebooks and *Manuscript Introduction*, Berkeley has a strong interest in providing just such a theory. However, in this early period he proceeds piecemeal, dealing with one sort of linguistic rule at a time. In this chapter, I examine Berkeley's treatment of three kinds of language: general terms, operative language,¹ and mathematical and scientific language. As will become clear in the discussion to follow, Berkeley does not recognize any sharp dividing lines between these domains; there is considerable overlap. Nevertheless Berkeley discusses them separately, and it will be convenient for us to follow him in this.

The theory of general terms is Berkeley's replacement for the doctrine of abstract general ideas. The theory of operative language is meant to show that Berkeley's theory can account for the meaningfulness of certain terms in moral and religious discourse which do not correspond to ideas, and therefore cannot be accounted for by idea-based versions of the Theory of Meanings. Berkeley believes that mathematical and scientific

1. I adopt this term from Williford 2003.

language provides another example of meaningful terms that fail to correspond to ideas, though these are of a rather different sort than the terms employed in operative language. In this chapter, I will provide an exposition Berkeley's early remarks on each of these types of discourse; in the next chapter I will argue that *Alciphron* 7 draws these threads together into a general theory of language.

3.1 General Terms

Since Berkeley's critique of the Theory of Meanings relied heavily on his claim that it is unable to account for the meaningfulness of general terms, it is imperative that he provide an alternative account of this phenomenon. Berkeley's strategy is to let one general term stand *directly* for any of several objects without the intervention of an idea. In the *Manuscript Introduction*, this led Berkeley to deny that there were any general ideas at all (MI, §20). However, in the published version, Berkeley instead states that ideas can become general in the same way words do, namely, by the introduction of the right sorts of conventional rules (PHK, Intro §12; see Belfrage 1986b, 326-328).

Berkeley's most detailed treatment of general terms is found in the *Manuscript Introduction*. Other than the reversal of Berkeley's position on general ideas, the changes from the manuscript to the published version appear mostly to have been made for the sake of brevity, rather than changes of opinion. The focus here will, therefore, be on the *Manuscript Introduction*, though the changes made to the published version will be examined along the way.

Berkeley's discussion begins with the claim that "General Words ... become so [only]² by being made to mark a Number of particular Existences." (MI, §18). Similarly, Berkeley writes in the published Introduction, that "the name 'line' ... must be thought to derive its generality from ... the various particular lines which it indifferently denotes" (PHK, Intro §12).³ More specifically, Berkeley's view is that "one Word [is] made the sign of a great number of particular Ideas, between which there is some likeness, & which are said to be of the same Sort" (MI, §19). Berkeley is thus endorsing a version of resemblance nominalism about universals (see Armstrong 1989, ch. 3). Berkeley is aware that, since resemblance comes in degrees, the extension of a word may be vague, but he is untroubled by this consequence. He writes that sorts do not "have any precise Bounds or Limits at all," but this is unproblematic, since "Language [is] made by & for the common Use of Men, who do not ordinarily take notice of the Minuter & less Considerable Differences of Things" (MI, §19).⁴ The basic theory, then, is that we call something by a general name, e.g. 'red,' because of a resemblance ('likeness') between it and the other things to which we apply that name (cf. NTV, §128).

In a later section of the manuscript, Berkeley summarizes his view by writing that "there is in Truth an Homonymy or Diversity of significations in every Name whatsoever except only the proper Names" (MI, §31).⁵ The use of the word 'homonymy' is clearly

2. The word 'only' is inserted above a caret mark.

3. Berkeley often says that a general term denotes *all* of the ideas in its extension. In this passage from the published Introduction, Berkeley makes it clear that the general term denotes all of the ideas in its extension not by standing for the class or collection of such ideas, but rather by 'indifferently denoting' each of the ideas in the class – that is, it stands for the ideas in its extension severally, not collectively. I thank Samuel Rickless for drawing my attention to this important distinction.

4. Berkeley later crossed out this entire passage. However, the view that because natural language is designed for practice rather than speculation it exhibits various harmless imprecisions recurs at PHK, §52 and DHP, 245-246. For more on these imprecisions, see below, §7.2.4.

5. Berkeley later crossed out the word 'homonymy,' but this was probably only because appearing to know something about Aristotelianism was out of fashion among the 'Moderns'; Berkeley also deleted

a reference to Aristotle, who writes, “When things have only a name in common and the definition of being [or: ‘account of the essence’] which corresponds to the name is different, they are called *homonymous*” (Aristotle *Cat.* 1 1a1-2).⁶ However, Aristotelian homonymy is not always mere equivocation. According to Aristotle, some objects are *systematically* homonymous. (In Aristotle’s usage, *objects* are said to be ‘homonymous’ *with respect to* a particular word.) In these cases, although the ‘account of the essence’ is not the same in each instance, the instances are systematically related to one core usage, so that the use of the same word in each case is no mere coincidence. Aristotle illustrates this point with the use of the word ‘healthy’ (Gr. ὑγιεινός). He writes, “Everything which is healthy is related to health, one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it produces it, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it” (Aristotle *Met.*, Γ2 1003a35-38). Christopher Shields calls this phenomenon ‘core-dependent homonymy’ (Shields 1999, ch. 4): the various objects which are called ‘healthy’ are so-called on account of their relation to a common ‘core,’ although each is related to the core in a different way.

The important point here for our purposes is that, in Berkeley’s theory of general terms, just as in Aristotelian core-dependent homonymy, although there is no universal which is shared by all of the members of the extension of the term, the term is not merely equivocal, but is used in a systematic way across a wide variety of cases. As Berkeley remarks, “It is one thing for to keep a name constantly to the same definition,

a passage at [MI](#), §19a that showed awareness of the Medieval debates about universals, and one at §22 which quoted Aristotle – in Greek, no less! The only references to Aristotle and Scholasticism remaining in the published version are mocking ([PHK](#), Intro §§17, 20). The other later changes to this passage are not substantive.

6. Recent treatments of Aristotle’s theory of homonymy and its role in his philosophy include Shields 1999 and Ward 2008.

and another to make it stand every where for the same idea; the one is necessary, the other useless and impracticable” (PHK, Intro §18).

The definition provides a rule for the application of the word. The word, as Berkeley likes to say, ‘denotes indifferently’ any object which satisfies the definition. However, language learning would be impossible if the only way to know the meaning of a word was to have an explicit definition of it in some language and understand that definition. Berkeley should therefore hold that what is fundamental is the rule itself, of which the definition is merely a statement. That Berkeley does in fact hold this is further confirmed by the fact that, as we shall see in the next two chapters, the adoption of this view allows his theory of general terms to form a coherent part of his total theory of language.

The rule for the use of the word ‘triangle,’ that it should be applied to any “Plain Surface comprehended by three right lines” (MI, §32; cf. PHK, Intro §18), tells us in exactly *what way* the objects in the extension of ‘triangle’ must be alike: they must resemble one another in, for instance, having the same number of sides. However, as Berkeley points out, “in the Definition, it is not said, whether the Surface be great, or small, black, or white, or Transparent [&c]⁷, whether the sides are long or short, equal or unequal, or with what angles they are inclin’d to each other” (MI, §32). Again, mature speakers are able to state all of these rules – the respects in which there must be resemblance and the respects in which there may not be – but, if Berkeley’s theory is to succeed, it must also be possible to follow the rule without being able to state it in language. Berkeley must take our capacity to recognize objects as falling under concepts as primitive (cf. Taylor 1978, 115).

It might be thought that the introduction of this primitive puts Berkeley’s theory in the same boat as the Theory of Meanings. If we are to have primitive recognitional

7. Inserted above a caret mark.

capacities, why not have primitive representation? The answer to this is that the abstractionists already appeal to our ability to recognize similarities between particular objects in their accounts of the formation of abstract ideas. Again, Berkeley's claim is that if we have the abilities which would be necessary to make and use abstract ideas (if such a thing were possible), then we don't need abstract ideas. If we have the ability to recognize objects as resembling one another, and to distinguish between different respects in which they resemble, an ability which the abstractionists say is needed to form abstract ideas, then we can successfully use general terms by the direct application of this ability without having abstract ideas.

This argument is, however, ineffective against Sergeant, for Sergeant does not believe in any process by which we form abstract ideas. Furthermore, as a realist about universals, Sergeant can give an account of resemblance, rather than taking it as primitive: objects resemble when they instantiate a common universal. As committed nominalists, most early modern philosophers would regard primitive recognitional capacities of the mind as more parsimonious and less mysterious than Sergeant's Aristotelian universals. Certainly the nominalist position involves fewer and less mysterious *entities*. However, it does so at the cost of assigning to those entities (minds) mysterious powers or capacities. In terms of the simplicity of his ontology at this point, it seems that Berkeley is better off than Locke and the Port-Royalists and at least no worse off than Sergeant.

An important question about Berkeley's theory which is discussed at length in the *Manuscript Introduction* but passed over in silence in the published version is the question of how we are to analyze *sentences* containing general terms, and this discussion helps clarify Berkeley's theory. Berkeley asks us to consider the sentence 'Melampus

is an animal,' where 'Melampus' is the proper name of some particular dog (MI, §34).⁸ According to Berkeley's theory, 'Melampus,' as a proper name, stands for this particular dog, and 'animal,' as a general term, can stand for this particular dog or any relevantly similar entity. Berkeley says that when I utter this sentence, "All that I intend to signify thereby [is] only this. That the particular [creature]⁹ thing I call Melampus has a right to be called by the Name Animal" (§34). In other words, what this sentence conveys is that the rules governing the use of the word 'animal' permit its application to Melampus.

Although the sentence signifies or conveys this information, it need not give rise to an explicit meta-linguistic belief *that Melampus is rightly called 'animal.'* Rather, it should be understood as producing in the hearer who accepts it certain dispositions, including the disposition to call Melampus 'animal.'¹⁰ Berkeley himself does not seem to see this point clearly in the *Manuscript Introduction*; however, as will be discussed in detail in chapter 5, below, Berkeley clearly recognizes the possibility of following rules without having explicit knowledge of them, and it is required for the success of his theory that most linguistic rules be of this sort.

If the hearer has acquired the rest of the relevant linguistic rules, a wide variety of other dispositions will be created by her acceptance of 'Melampus is an animal.' For instance, the hearer has acquired the rule that 'animal' is properly applied only to objects to which the phrase 'living thing' also applies; the hearer will therefore be disposed, under appropriate circumstances, to call Melampus 'living thing.' Furthermore, if the

8. Melampus was a famous seer in Greek mythology (Hornblower and Spawforth 2005, s.v. 'Melampus (1)'). So far as I know, there is no significance to Berkeley's choice of this name in his example.

9. Brackets original.

10. On the linguistic practice of accepting or rejecting the assertions of others, see Brandom 1983. On the relationship of this disposition to the meta-linguistic belief, see below, §7.1.

hearer also speaks Greek, she will be disposed to call Melampus ‘ζῳον.’¹¹ This much can be done using only the rules for general terms; as we shall see, this is only one of the many sorts of linguistic rules discussed by Berkeley.

As has been noted, in the *Manuscript Introduction* Berkeley denies the possibility of general ideas. By the time he wrote the published version, he had come to see that this was a mistake. The reason it is a mistake is that Berkeley’s immaterialism has the consequence that a word (or, rather, an utterance or inscription of a word) *just is* an idea, and words can clearly be general (cf. Lennon 1988, 242-243). There is, then, no reason why there should not be general ideas of other sorts. In the published Introduction, Berkeley writes, “By observing how ideas become general, we may better judge how words are made so” (PHK, Intro §12). Berkeley in fact holds that words and ideas become general in *precisely* the same way, that is, by the adoption of a rule of use which allows the idea or word to be substituted indifferently for any of a broad class of ideas.

Berkeley describes the formation of general ideas as follows:

an idea, which considered in it self is particular, becomes general by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort. To make this plain by an example, suppose a geometrician is demonstrating the method of cutting a line in two equal parts. He draws, for instance, a black line of an inch in length; this, which in itself is a particular line, is nevertheless with regard to its signification general, since as it is there used, it represents all particular lines whatsoever . . . And as that particular

11. As Samuel Rickless pointed out to me, the elimination of a language-independent mental contents creates serious problems for translation. One way in which such problems can be mitigated (but by no means solved) is by attention to the rules followed by bilingual speakers (Quine 1957, 7-8; 1960, 27-29, 47). If detailed accounts of reference and truth in Berkeley’s theory can be given (I undertake these projects in chs. 6 and 7, respectively), then similarity or sameness of reference for words and truth conditions for sentences may provide an adequate foundation on which to build a system of translation rules, even in the absence of bilingual speakers. For more on translation, see §7.1, below.

line becomes general, by being made a sign, so the name 'line' which taken absolutely is particular, by being a sign is made general (PHK, Intro §12).

Berkeley here clearly states that the general idea of a line and the general term 'line' become general in the same way. However, there is a clear point of disanalogy which some commentators have thought important: the general idea of a line *is itself a line* and therefore *resembles* the objects it signifies, whereas the general term 'line' does not (Bolton 1987, 69; Winkler 1989, 42-43; Jesseph 1993, 35; Jacovides 2009, 425). The importance of this disanalogy is often defended by claiming that it is necessary for the success of Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism. For instance, Martha Brandt Bolton writes, "If a mind sets an idea up to represent something else, the idea must share certain features with its acquired object. Berkeley draws from this the important conclusion that the acquired object must be another idea" (Bolton 1987, 69). This, however, is incorrect for two reasons. First, the question of whether ideas must represent by resemblance is quite irrelevant to immaterialism, since linguistic representation, for Berkeley, does not depend on the having of ideas. If we can meaningfully talk about material substances without having ideas of them, in the way we can meaningfully talk about spirits without having ideas of them, then Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism fail. This is the thrust of what Phillip Cummins calls 'Hylas' Parity Argument' (DHP, 233; Cummins 1982).¹² Constraining the representation of general ideas to what they resemble will not, of itself, make the case for immaterialism, since words represent without resembling and their representation is not parasitic on representation by ideas. Second, by overplaying the importance of resemblance, these commentators underplay the parallel Berkeley sees between general ideas and general terms. Berkeley's remark that "as the [inch-line] owes its generality, not to its being the sign of an abstract or general line, but of all

12. For more on this issue, see below, ch. 6.

particular right lines that may possibly exist, so the [word ‘line’] must be thought to derive its generality from the same cause” (PHK, Intro §12) strongly suggests that he means to claim that the general idea represents in *precisely* the same way the general term does.

Berkeley says that both the general term ‘line’ and the general idea of a line “derive [their] generality from the same cause, namely, the various particular lines which [they] indifferently denote[.]” (Intro §12). In other words, in both cases a conventional rule is adopted which associates the sign with a broad class of ideas, each of which has (to use the language of Berkeley’s ‘Melampus’ discussion) equal right to be associated with the idea or term.

What, then, is the difference between a general idea and a general term? The difference is simply the nature of the associated rules. The rules for the use of a general idea make reference to the idea ‘considered in itself’ and the rules for the use of a general term do not. For instance, the rules for the use of the general idea of a triangle (Intro §§15-16) tell us that this idea may be substituted for another idea, provided that idea resembles *it* by (*inter alia*) having the same number of sides. Furthermore, the rules tell me that I may perform demonstrations (Berkeley seems primarily to have Euclidean constructions in mind) using the general idea of a triangle and apply the results of those demonstrations to any of the ideas it stands for, provided that the demonstration makes use only of certain features (e.g. the number of sides) and not of others (e.g. the magnitudes of the angles). When using the general term ‘triangle,’ the rules never tell me to operate on *the word itself* in any way.

The point here is that, contrary to the commentators mentioned, the resemblance of the general idea to its objects is not doing important work as far as its ability to

represent them is concerned.¹³ Representation (in the broad sense; see p. 84) does not require resemblance for Berkeley; what it requires is that we be able to follow some rules which associate the sign with its objects.

3.2 Operative Language

One of the tenets of the Theory of Meanings which Berkeley attacks is “that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas” (PHK, Intro §19). Against this view, Berkeley cites three examples of other aims which speech may have: “the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, [and] the putting the mind in some particular disposition” (Intro §20). Much of the literature refers to Berkeley’s discussion of these alternative ends of language as his theory of ‘emotive meaning’ (see, e.g., Belfrage 1986a; Berman 1994, 143-148). However, the use of this term may suggest that Berkeley is to be classified as an ‘emotivist,’ in the twentieth century sense of that term, about ethics and/or revealed theology, a thesis which is quite controversial. Furthermore, even some of those who use the term ‘emotive meaning’ acknowledge that not all of the uses of language discussed under this heading have to do with emotions (see, e.g., Belfrage 1986a, 644-645). Kenneth Williford therefore proposes, on the basis of Alc, §7.17, that we use the term ‘operative language’ instead (Williford 2003, 272n2).¹⁴ Here, Berkeley says that instead of “the imparting or acquiring of ideas,” speech may aim at “something of an active operative nature, tending to a conceived good.” In the account of general terms, Berkeley argued that the rules governing the use of words do not always associate each word with some one idea; instead, one word

13. Here I am in agreement with Brook 1973, 35.

14. Williford cites from the 1752 edition of *Alciphron*, where the relevant section is numbered 7.14.

can often ‘indifferently denote’ any of several ideas. In offering his theory of operative language, Berkeley argues that there may be linguistic rules of an entirely different sort, which do not involve connections between words and ideas at all.

Again, the fullest treatment is in the *Manuscript Introduction*. However, the published version is much clearer as to Berkeley’s general picture, so the discussion here will be framed around the published text and supplemented with discussion of the manuscript.

Berkeley’s approach is to begin by trying to understand, in particular instances, what language is being used to accomplish, and to proceed from here to conclusions about meaningfulness or significance.¹⁵ Proponents of ideist versions of the Theory of Meanings assumed that language only ever had one end (or, at least, that there was only one end of language worthy of serious philosophical discussion), and that end was the communication of ideas. As a result, they badly misunderstood nearly the whole of human language, for it is very rarely the case that this is the *sole* end of any utterance. The communication of ideas “is in many cases barely subservient, and sometimes entirely omitted, when [the other ends of language] can be obtained without it as . . . not infrequently happens in familiar use of language” (PHK, Intro §20).

The proponents of the Theory of Meanings were probably led astray by the fact that they had been focusing on the sort of language that occurs in philosophical treatises whose ends are purely theoretical or speculative. This sort of language is the exception rather than the rule: “words . . . were framed by the vulgar, merely for conveniency and dispatch in the common actions of life, without any regard for speculation” (DHP, 246).

15. This strategy becomes explicit in Alc, §7.8; see below, §4.3. The role of the aims and intentions of speakers in Berkeley’s theory is emphasized by Williford 2003. There are obvious proto-Wittgensteinian elements to Berkeley’s approach here, but I will not pause to discuss them at present.

The use of language in speculation is an extension of language beyond its original domain in the common actions of life. As Wittgenstein famously put it, philosophy occurs “when language *goes on holiday*” (Wittgenstein 1953, §1.38).¹⁶

When we realize that language does not aim only, or even primarily, at the communication of ideas, we ought also to realize that a theory of meaning given entirely in terms of ideas will necessarily be inadequate. Berkeley tells us that it “often happen[s] either in hearing or reading a discourse, that the passions of fear, love, hatred, admiration, disdain, and the like, arise immediately in [the] mind upon the perception of certain words, without any ideas coming between” (PHK, Intro §20). Berkeley is not here talking about some particular restricted domain of discourse. “At first, indeed,” he continues,

the words might have occasioned ideas that were fit to produce those emotions; but, if I mistake not, it will be found that when language is once grown familiar, the hearing of the sounds or sights of the characters is oft immediately attended with those passions, which at first were wont to be produced by the intervention of ideas that are now quite omitted (Intro §20).

This is the sort of thing that can happen with just *any* word, including perfectly well-behaved words like proper nouns (Intro §20). By constant use and constant association with a certain emotional reaction, the word can eventually produce the emotional reaction without the intervention of ideas.

Berkeley is trying to make the case that one can understand a sentence without having ideas corresponding to each of the words involved. However, it should be clear that

16. Thus Jonathan Bennett is doubly mistaken when he claims that Berkeley is interested in “divorcing meaning from ideas” only for non-theoretical uses of language, and hence “only in respect of the periphery of language” (Bennett 1971, 54). Bennett is mistaken in supposing that Berkeley’s critique applies only to non-theoretical language, for nothing could be more theoretical than advanced mathematics and Newtonian physics, but these are explicitly within the scope of Berkeley’s thesis (see below, §3.3). Furthermore, Bennett assumes that non-theoretical (or, as he also calls them, ‘practical’) uses of language are ‘peripheral.’ This is a view Berkeley adamantly rejects.

one can have an emotional reaction to a word without understanding it. For instance, some individual might hear a word in a language he does not speak repeated over and over again while he is being tortured, and thereby come to have a negative emotional response to it, without ever learning its meaning. If, then, Berkeley's observations are to support his point, there must be cases in which having the appropriate emotional reaction is *sufficient for understanding the utterance*. This is why Berkeley talks here about language accomplishing its *ends*, and, a little below, talks about the *intentions of the speaker*. There are cases, that is, where the fact that the utterance elicits a particular emotional response is sufficient for the accomplishment of the ends at which the utterance aims. This, however, will still not be sufficient if the intentions of the speaker are too idiosyncratic. For instance, if the torturer later repeats the hated word (which, let us suppose, does not mean *torture* or anything like that), intending to elicit fear from the victim, and the victim is indeed afraid, it does not follow that the victim has understood the word. What is needed is an example where *the rules of language* authorize the use of the word to elicit the emotional (or other) reaction in question.

In the published Introduction, Berkeley offers two examples:

May we not . . . be affected with the promise of a 'good thing', though we have not an idea of what it is? Or is not the being threatened with danger sufficient to excite a dread, though we think not of any particular evil likely to befall us, nor yet frame to our selves an idea of danger in abstract? (PHK, Intro §20)

The first example is discussed at great length in the manuscript, where Berkeley is concerned with the religious doctrine of an inconceivably great heavenly reward. He writes,

We are told [that]¹⁷ the Good Things which God hath prepared for them that love [him]¹⁸ are such as Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard nor hath it enter'd into the Heart of Man to conceive. What man will pretend to say these Words of the Inspir'd Writer are empty and . . . insignificant? (MI, §36)

Berkeley's example sentence, which is a reference to 1 Corinthians 2:9 (quoting Isaiah 64:4), could be given the simpler paraphrase, 'for those who obey God, there is a reward of which no human being now has an idea.' Of course, however, we understand the sentence now. Further, Berkeley denies that there can be an abstract idea of a reward: every idea of a reward, is an idea of some particular reward. Since St. Paul himself says that we have no idea of the 'Good Things,' and he gives us no description of them, it cannot be his intention to excite in our minds an idea of the 'Good Things' in question. Instead, Berkeley says, his aim was "to make [us] more chearfull and fervent in [our] Duty" (§36).

Promising an unspecified reward is a perfectly ordinary use of language. The aim of that use is to motivate someone to take the course of action to which the reward is attached. It frequently accomplishes that aim. However, since the reward is left unspecified, no idea of the reward is given to the hearer. Nevertheless, if the hearer is motivated in the way the speaker intends, then the speech-act has been carried off successfully: both the speaker and the hearer are using language competently, and language is accomplishing its ends.

Consider an everyday use of language: a flier on a lamp post reading 'Lost Puppy; Reward for Return.' The reward is unspecified. One might, nevertheless, have an idea of some particular reward – say, a certain sum of money – on the basis of social conventions

17. Brackets original.

18. Inserted above a caret.

regarding appropriate rewards for returning lost puppies. On the other hand, one can equally well understand the sign without having any such idea. The rule governing reward assertions does not require that, upon hearing such an assertion, one should form an idea of a reward. What it does require is that upon *accepting* such an assertion one be at least somewhat motivated to perform the action in question (find and return the puppy). This motivation may be weak, even negligible, in force, and it may be overridden by other considerations. It may therefore have little effect on feeling and no effect on action. However, when a competent speaker accepts the assertion, the rules require her to have this motivation, however small.

One can, of course, reject the assertion without calling one's linguistic competence into question. One might think the speaker is accidentally or intentionally misusing the word 'reward.' Berkeley mentions two conditions for accepting the assertion: one must think the speaker has it in her power to bestow a reward, and one must think that the speaker is honest (MI, §37). A further condition, not mentioned by Berkeley is that one must think that the thing the speaker is promising to bestow is in fact a reward, i.e. something worth having. It may be that, unbeknownst to the speaker, the thing offered is of no value to me. In this case, the speaker would be mistaken in her belief that the item in question is a reward (or, at least, that it would be a reward for me). This is an indication of the rules governing the speaker's use of the word 'reward:' the speaker must have it in her power to bestow some benefit on the hearer, and intend to do so if, but only if, the hearer does what is requested. These rules governing the behavior of the speaker and the hearer constitute the meaning of the word 'reward' in this context.

Two objections may be made to this account of the meaning of 'reward,' one interpretive and one philosophical. Interpretively it might be objected that the word 'reward'

ought to be covered by Berkeley's theory of general terms. Isn't 'reward' just a perfectly ordinary general term, applying to such diverse things as sums of money, ice cream cones, and heavenly bliss?

The answer to this question is emphatically 'yes,' but this does not vitiate the interpretation given. Shortly after the mention of rewards and dangers in the published Introduction, Berkeley writes, "general names are often used in the propriety of language without the speaker's designing them for marks of ideas in his own, which he would have them raise in the mind of the hearer" (PHK, Intro §20). These different sorts of rules may apply to one and the same word, and which rule can actually be applied will depend on the context. So, for instance, one may say 'the reward' and thereby refer to some *particular object* of which both speaker and hearer have an idea, or one may use 'the reward' in reference to the heavenly reward of which no human presently has any idea. (Note also that this use of language will still be meaningful even if there is no afterlife.) This supports my earlier claim that Berkeley's theory of operative language is not restricted to some narrow domain of discourse (e.g. moral or religious language), but is a theory about language in general.¹⁹

The philosophical objection to the account of 'reward' is this: in laying out the rules governing the use of the word 'reward,' I several times used 'reward' and its synonyms (and in this I follow Berkeley). Does this not vitiate the account?

This, however, simply repeats a difficulty dealt with above, namely, that speakers cannot formulate the rules of language until after they know a language. What this means is that one must be able to *follow* a rule without being able to formulate it. It

19. The fact that operative terms are not part of a 'bracketed discourse' of any sort means that Berkeley's theory is not affected by Geach's famous objection to expressivism (Geach 1965, 462-464): Berkeley is able to agree with Geach that operative terms are governed by the very same inference rules as other terms, and therefore can be 'mixed and matched' in compound sentences and patterns of inference. Berkeley's understanding of inference, and its application to operative language, will be discussed in §5.4, below.

suffices for the correct use of ‘reward’ that the speaker has the requisite powers and intentions and the hearer is properly motivated. No meta-linguistic thoughts or beliefs are needed.

One might worry, however, about how it actually comes about that people follow these rules. This is not, after all, very much like learning the meanings of concrete nouns by hearing people say the word and seeing them point to the object. Something more complex must be going on. About how someone acquires the word ‘reward,’ Berkeley writes,

When he was a Child he had frequently heard those Words used to him to create in him an obedience to the Commands of those that spoke them. And as he grew up he has found by experience that upon the mentioning of those Words by an honest Man it has been his Interest to have doubled his Zeal and Activity for the service of that Person. Thus there [has] grown up in his Mind a Customary Connexion betwixt the hearing that Proposition and being dispos’d to obey with chearfulness the Injunctions that accompany it (MI, §37).

The process here is essentially the reverse of the torture victim case discussed above. One is simply *conditioned* to respond to the promise of a reward in a certain way (Berman 1994, 162).²⁰

The ‘reward’ case is the only case where Berkeley describes, in detail, how a language learner acquires a word with operative meaning, and it is worth noting that, in this case, the word has both operative meaning and what we might call ‘referential meaning.’ However, Berkeley’s account of the acquisition of the operative meaning here makes no

20. It is no coincidence that Alciphron raises the objection to religion from fatalism immediately after Euphranor has finished expounding this theory (Alc, §7.19); the theory involves forms of conditioning which seem, at least superficially, to be at odds with libertarian conceptions of free will.

mention of the referential meaning. This suggests that the same account can be applied to words that have no referential meaning at all. Furthermore, the process of conditioning which is described does not appear to presuppose any other linguistic abilities. It appears, then, that operative meaning can float entirely free of referential meaning.

‘Reward’ is an example of a general term which is associated with certain rules *besides* the rule allowing it to be substituted for the idea of any particular reward, and in which those rules often function properly in the absence of any particular reward-idea for which it can be substituted. (Of course, when the reward is given and received, the parties should recognize it as a reward, applying the general term rule.²¹) The point of the utterance in the case where no such ideas are had is to motivate someone to do something, and to take a certain emotional attitude to the task (to do it with “Cheerfulness and Zeal and Perseverance” (MI, §37)).

‘Reward’ talk exhibits the first two ends of language Berkeley listed: the utterance aims at “the raising of some passion [and] the exciting to . . . an action.” Berkeley’s next example deals with the third and final end of language on Berkeley’s list, “putting the mind in some particular disposition.” Words of this sort float free of referential meaning in a stronger sense than ‘reward’ does. Berkeley writes, “when a Schoolman tells me ‘Aristotle hath said it’, all I conceive he means by it is to dispose me to embrace his opinion with the deference and submission which custom hath annexed to that name” (PHK, Intro §20). This is, of course, a joke, the sort of jibe at Scholasticism which was

21. Thus Berkeley’s account of the heavenly reward can be regarded as a version of what James Ross has called ‘eschatological pragmatism:’ the view that, for the eschatological claims of Christianity, “truth is fulfillment of expectation,” or, in other words, that the eschatological claims of Christianity are true if and only if “each [Christian], at the parousia, will ‘find his faith fulfilled,’ each finding that ‘This is just what I expected’ ” (Ross 1988, 283-284). Berkeley’s account is by no means identical with Ross’s, but they share this feature: that having correct faith regarding Christian eschatological doctrine consists not in being able to *imagine*, or even *describe*, the eschaton, but, rather, in a disposition to recognize the eschaton as the fulfillment of one’s expectations when one gets there. Berkeley, unlike Ross, emphasizes that this belief must be regarded as meaningful *now* because of its motivational role.

On Berkeley’s relationship to pragmatism about truth more generally, see below, §7.2.2.

fashionable among the Moderns. However, the point is a serious one. It is possible, Berkeley thinks, to associate truth so strongly with some combination of words that one no longer thinks about the literal meaning of the words and simply accepts what comes after them. One naturally thinks of religious and political ideologies as examples. One might hear a phrase like ‘the Bible says ...’ or ‘we Liberals believe ...’ and simply accept what comes after it without ever thinking about the Bible and what it says or about Liberals and what they believe. Furthermore, such a habit might become so widespread in a speaker community as actually to alter the meanings of the words. One can imagine a linguistically isolated cult with an authoritarian leader who makes pronouncements beginning ‘the Bible says ...’ (or, ‘God has revealed to me ...’) and is unquestioningly and without further thought believed by his followers. In this case ‘the Bible says ...’ might come to mean ‘I authoritatively pronounce ...’ and the usage might persist long after no one knew what the Bible was. Berkeley cannot, of course, seriously suppose that ‘Aristotle hath said it’ functions like this among the Scholastics, for the Scholastics engaged in all sorts of debates about what Aristotle said, but this is the serious philosophical content of his anti-Scholastic jibe.

This example shows how a word or phrase might lose all connection with ideas and still have a significant (if nefarious) use. Berkeley’s last example in the appears to be an example of a case where words are dissociated from ideas altogether. This is the analysis of moral discourse.

This portion of the manuscript must be handled with care as Berkeley made quite significant revisions to it, and then deleted the entire discussion from the published text. In the first stratum of the manuscript, Berkeley begins by asking what is the purpose of telling a person “that Such an Action is Honourable and vertuous.” He then denies the Lockean account of this assertion, according to which the aim is to excite in the mind

of the hearer the abstract ideas of the action and of honour and virtue together with a perception of their agreement. In place of Locke's rejected account, Berkeley says that "this [is] the full Purpose namely that those Words should excite in the Mind of the Hearer an esteem of that particular Action and stirr him up to the performance of it" (MI, §41).

It is primarily on the basis of this text that Belfrage takes Berkeley (in the *Manuscript Introduction*) to endorse the view that moral assertions are disguised imperatives. *Manuscript Introduction*—) Belfrage says that, according to Berkeley, the meaning of 'Such an Action is Honourable' "is exactly the same as" the meaning of 'Perform and esteem such an action!' (Belfrage 1986a, 645) Belfrage likewise asserts the equivalence of 'There are inconceivably pleasant joys in store for blessed souls in heaven' with 'Act in accordance with what Christian doctrine prescribes as being our duty!' (646) Belfrage's strong claim of exact equivalence cannot be correct, for each phrase clearly differs from the other in terms of its appropriate usage and the appropriate response to it (cf. Stevenson 1937, 24-26). The promise of a reward, for instance, is supposed to make us cheerful and zealous, but a *command* does not do this. If we take the command as coming from someone with authority, or someone with the power to punish disobedience, we will obey it (other things being equal), but it will not produce cheerfulness and zeal as the promise of a reward will. What is true is that each pair of sentences, according to Berkeley, has the same primary aim: one promises a reward for an action, praises an action, or commands an action all in order to get someone to perform that action. However, these are genuinely different methods of pursuing that end, and they are different precisely because the sentences differ in meaning.²²

22. Furthermore, as Williford points out, it is hardly credible that *Bishop* Berkeley should hold that claims about the heavenly reward have no truth-value (Williford 2003, 300-301). The problem of Berkeley's being saddled with forms of anti-realism he would find objectionable will be discussed at length in our treatment of reference and truth in Berkeley's mature theory, chs. 6 and 7, below.

There are further problems. In subsequent revisions, Berkeley seems to have softened his position in this paragraph. He corrected the initial question to ask “whether *every time* [a man] tells another that Such an Action is Honourable and vertuous” he is trying to convey the ideas of honor and virtue into his hearer’s mind, and he added a clause specifying that the man speaks “with an intention to excite [his hearer] to the performance of” the action. All this suggests that Berkeley may have been tempted to make the case of moral discourse more similar to the case of reward talk, by saying that we sometimes had ideas of particular virtues (or perhaps particular virtuous acts) when we talk about virtue, but the language also has a motivational use and an emotional content.

Nevertheless, Berkeley does seem, at least at some points in his career, to have held some form of non-cognitivism about moral discourse. In his notebooks he writes, “We have no Ideas of Vertues & Vices, no Ideas of Moral Actions . . . morality consisting in the Volition chiefly” (N, §669). Since ‘volition’ (a synonym for ‘will’) is just another name for spirit,²³ and there can be no idea of spirit (PHK, §27), the claim that “morality consist[s] in the Volition chiefly” is probably meant to explain why we have no ideas of the virtues and vices: each of them is a disposition of the will.

Berkeley’s discussion is, again, meant to explain how these particular words can be meaningful without standing for ideas. The answer is that these words are uttered with the intention of bringing about a certain disposition of will. This suggests the radical claim that *to accept or believe a moral proposition just is to have a certain disposition of will*. In fact, I will argue below (§7.1) that by the time he wrote *Alciphron*, Berkeley held that to accept or believe *any* proposition is to have a certain disposition of will.

If Berkeley accepted this claim about moral discourse, then he would have a clear picture of what goes on in the affirmation that a particular action is virtuous. When one

23. More precisely: the *faculty* of volition (will), which is here in view, just is the spirit. Individual volitions just are actions. For details, see below, §§6.4-6.5.

sincerely asserts a proposition, one accepts that proposition and wants one's hearer to accept it. But, according to this view, accepting moral propositions has nothing to do with ideas, and everything to do with the dispositions of the agent's will. Now, Berkeley does not say exactly what this disposition of will is, though his talk of 'esteeming' the action and being 'stirred up to the performance of it' suggests that he does not hold the implausible view that believing an action is virtuous is the same as being disposed to perform it; rather, he holds that believing an action is virtuous involves taking a certain practical and emotional attitude toward it.

Even in the earliest stratum, there is no support for Belfrage's radical claim of exact equivalence between 'such an action is honourable' and 'perform and esteem such an action!' However, we may say instead that these two utterances are, for the early Berkeley, related to one another in the same way in which the assertion 'snow is white' is related to the imperative 'believe that snow is white!' The exact nature of this relationship is, of course, a difficult question.

I have been emphasizing the importance of rule-following to Berkeley's theory of language. What the theory of operative language adds is that the rules we follow in language will not always be simple associations of words with ideas. The rules may require competent speakers, under certain circumstances, to feel an emotion, or perform or refrain from some action, or adopt some general attitude or disposition of mind. In order to determine what the relevant rules are, we must examine the aim or purpose of an utterance. Words and phrases that accomplish their purpose should be regarded as meaningful or significant, regardless of whether there is any such object as the 'meaning' or 'signification' of that word or phrase.

In this early period, Berkeley provides an analysis of how operative meaning comes about which appears to make it possible that operative meaning could float free of referential meaning entirely. However, he remains ambivalent as to how far this has occurred in our actual language, especially with respect to moral terms. All of the examples which make it into the published introduction are examples in which ideas continue to play a crucial role in the total meaning of the word, although there are important aspects of meaning which would be missed by an entirely idea-based semantics.

3.3 Mathematical and Scientific Language

There are three domains of discourse discussed by Berkeley whose rules are quite different from those involved in general terms or operative language. These are the domains of arithmetic and algebra, geometry, and physics. Not all of these ‘discourses’ proceed, of course, in natural language; much of the work is done in formal mathematics. However, like natural language, formal mathematics is a system of conventional symbols governed by complex rules, and Berkeley often uses mathematical analogies to illuminate his theory of language (e.g. [PHK](#), Intro §19). At one point Berkeley even identifies ‘modern algebra’ as “a more short, apposite, and artificial sort of language” ([Alc](#), §7.17). As a result, we may treat Berkeley’s account of mathematical symbols as part of his theory of language.

I shall not attempt here to give a general interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy of math and science, but will instead focus on Berkeley’s analysis of how the symbols function. Furthermore, we do not yet have a sufficient grasp of Berkeley’s philosophy of language to tackle the difficult questions of truth, reference, and objectivity, so these must be postponed. The aim here will be simply to explain what sorts of rules Berkeley believes govern the use of signs in the three domains mentioned.

3.3.1 Arithmetic and Algebra

According to Berkeley the subject matter of arithmetic is a certain collection of signs (PHK, §122). Equivalent sign systems may be constructed using English number words, or tally marks, or Arabic numerals (§121). In his notebooks, Berkeley is quite explicit in simply *identifying* numbers with their names or numerals (N, §§763, 767; Jesseph 1993, 109).²⁴ In the *Principles* matters are less clear, though Berkeley does assert that “the number of any particular things is said to be known, when we know the name or figures (with their due arrangement) that according to the standing analogy belong to them” (PHK, §121). In other words, to know how many widgets there are just is to be able to apply the number word or numeral which, according to the sign system we have adopted, is appropriate to the collection of widgets. There is no pre-linguistic grasp of *the number two*, whether as a Platonic entity or as an idea; there is only the word ‘two,’ and the numeral ‘2,’ and the rules which allow us to apply them to pairs of things. The reason these rules are of interest to us is that by means of them the sign systems we adopt “direct us how to act with relation to things and dispose rightly of them” (§122).

Number words and numerals, for Berkeley, begin as simple general terms: ‘two’ is a name which indifferently signifies any pair of objects (Brook 1973, 148). Berkeley imagines that numbers began from “single strokes, points or the like, each whereof was made to signify an unit, that is, some one thing of whatever kind they had occasion to reckon” (PHK, §121). The generality here is critical: the tally mark signifies just any ‘unit’ – that is, any one thing. It is natural, then, that a pair of tally marks should be used to signify any pair of things, and so forth. Other notations were developed in order to make the representation of large numbers easier. The critical thing which

24. Although some earlier editions of Berkeley’s notebooks had the nonsensical reading “Numbers are nothing but Names, never Words” for entry 763, more recent editions, corrected from the manuscript, read “meer Words” instead. See Luce 1989, 307.

each notation must have in order to form the basis of a system of arithmetic is what we should nowadays call a *successor function*: that is, upon seeing any numeral, we must be able, by following some rule, to construct the numeral which should come next. This is different from any linguistic rule we have encountered so far: it is a rule for *constructing new signs*.

To know a numeral system is just to have the capacity to enumerate any arbitrary ‘collection of units’ (PHK, §120). Once such a system is in place we can go further and construct arithmetic proper. That is, we can introduce rules for manipulating signs to get from the number of one collection to the number of another, “and thus computing in signs . . . we may be able rightly to sum up, divide, and proportion the things themselves that we intend to number” (§121). The fact that we here ‘compute in signs’ is crucial: in following the rules we manipulate the symbols directly without recourse to any other ideas. Other ideas come in only at the beginning, when we set up the problem, and at the end, when the result is applied – and of course there are cases where the application of arithmetic is far less direct than this, and so the manipulation of symbols is even farther removed from any ideas which can be said to be signified by the symbols.

Algebra adds two more kinds of signs which obey different rules. The first are the ordinary variables. Berkeley observes that in algebra “though a particular quantity be marked by each letter, yet to proceed right it is not requisite that in every step each letter suggest to our thoughts that particular quantity it was appointed to stand for” (Intro §19). Berkeley says this in the course of making a point about how words work, and he of course thinks that the thing he is pointing out is a quite common feature of signs. However, this particular case makes Berkeley’s point especially easy to accept because of an additional point regarding the use of variables. Within the context of a single problem, a variable is much like a numeral, in that it indifferently signifies

any collection of units of a certain size.²⁵ However, *the size is not known* until after the problem has been solved. That is, if one begins the problem by saying ‘let x be the number of widgets in this box,’ ‘ x ’ stands not only for that collection of widgets, but for any other collection equinumerous with the widgets. The aim of the problem is, however, to discover how many widgets there are, which is to say, to discover that numeral which is equivalent in signification to ‘ x .’ This can be done by following the rules of arithmetic. What this shows is that the actual, immediate ability to substitute a word for what it signifies is not crucial to signification; it is possible for the rules to pick out the signified ideas by some more complex means.

The second kind of sign is not mentioned in the *Principles*, though Berkeley mentions it in his notebooks (N, §764) and makes much of it in *Alciphron*. This is “the algebraic mark, which denotes the root of a negative square,” i.e. the imaginary constant ‘ i ’ (Alc, §7.17). One simply cannot have a collection of i many objects, or an object i units long, and so the symbol ‘ i ’ does not signify anything. However, being significant does not require signifying something. The symbol ‘ i ’ is significant because the definition $i^2 = -1$, together with the ordinary rules of arithmetic, allows us to make calculations using i which ultimately do lead to useful results that can be applied to the world (see Pearce 2008, 162-163). In the *Principles*, Berkeley discusses only the arithmetic of natural numbers. His theory of geometry will allow him to give concrete application to the rational numbers; however, since he takes space and time to be fundamentally discrete,²⁶ irrational numbers must occupy the same position as i : they ‘have their use in logistic operations’ (see Alc, §7.17) and so are significant despite not standing for any objects.

25. In the notebooks, Berkeley says that “Algebraic Species or letters are denominations of Denominations” (N, §758). Presumably he means that the letter is a sign of the numeral. This is at odds with his view in the Introduction to the *Principles*, where the letter stands not for a numeral but for ‘a particular quantity.’

26. On space, see NTV, *passim*, along with the discussion of geometry, below; on time, see PHK, §98.

In the early (1707) *Miscellanea Mathematica*, Berkeley had compared algebra to a game, like chess, and even constructed a game board for it, which he recommended as a teaching tool (BW, 4:214-220; Jesseph 1993, 106-117). This provides a helpful understanding of Berkeley's thought on the workings of arithmetic and algebra: making arithmetic and algebraic calculations is like moving pieces on a chess board according to the rules of chess. The crucial limitation of this analogy, according to Berkeley, is that the 'games' of arithmetic and algebra are meant to have a practical point, rather than to be mere entertainment (PHK, §119). The rules which have been adopted are, therefore, not purely arbitrary in the way the rules of chess are, but are subservient to such practical purposes as determining the number of widgets in the box.

3.3.2 Geometry

Unlike arithmetic and algebra, geometry is, according to Berkeley, not merely a science of signs or symbols. It is meant to give an account of space, and space is an *empirical* concept. There is, however, a difficulty. The infinite divisibility of figures is a fundamental tenet of classical geometry, but Berkeley held, and argued at length in the *New Theory of Vision*, that empirical space is discrete, so that any given perceived figure is composed of a finite number of sensible minima (NTV, §54). Berkeley also provides a very simple argument for this conclusion in the *Principles*:

Every particular finite extension . . . is an idea existing only in the mind, and consequently each part thereof must be perceived. If therefore I cannot perceive innumerable parts in any finite extension that I consider, it is certain they are not contained in it (PHK, §124).

This view led Berkeley, early in his career, to a radical rejection of classical geometry (Jesseph 1993, 45-69). At one point in the notebooks, Berkeley goes so far as baldly to

deny the Pythagorean Theorem (N, §500). Fortunately, Berkeley had rejected this absurd view by the time he wrote the *Principles*, and he there attempted to use his theory of signs to develop a theory which could accommodate classical geometry while denying that there were any infinitely divisible idea-objects (Jesseph 1993, 69-78).

The difficulty here can be brought into focus by considering two particular facts about Euclidean geometry: first, by a very simple Euclidean construction, any line segment can be bisected; second, the Pythagorean Theorem obtains. Taking the first case first, we may say that if space is discrete and any line segment is composed of a finite number of minima, then a line segment is successfully bisected if and only if there are an equal number of the line segment's minima on either side of the bisecting line. Now, as Richard Brook points out (Brook 1973, 157), the bisecting line must be at least one minimum in width. If it is exactly one minimum in width, then it must pass through one of the minima in the bisected line segment. As a result, it can bisect the line segment only if the line segment contains an odd number of points. If the line segment contained an even number of points, it could still be bisected (contrary to Brook) if the bisecting line were two minima (or some other even number) wide. If the line segment were only one or two points in length, then it could be bisected only by drawing a line which passed through the entire segment, so that there were zero points on each side of the bisecting line. Berkeley's theory thus does not have the consequence that there are line segments which cannot be bisected; rather, it has the consequence that bisecting a line segment requires a certain sort of matching between the length of the line segment and the width of one's pencil. This is, needless to say, quite odd and in radical conflict with classical geometry.

As for the second problem, as has been known from antiquity, the Pythagorean Theorem entails the existence of incommensurable line segments. More precisely, it entails

that there are some triangles such that, no matter what units of length one chooses, one cannot assign an integer length to every side. However, Berkeley holds that there *is* a unit, namely, the sensory minimum, such that every sensed or imagined line segment is an integer number of units long. This, again, is in radical conflict with classical geometry.

In the *Principles*, Berkeley aims to resolve these difficulties and reconcile his theory of space with classical geometry. Berkeley's solution is simple, but quite innovative. According to Berkeley, the particular figures or diagrams considered in geometric calculations are to be regarded as signs or symbols representing all particular figures of that sort. So, Berkeley says, when a geometer is demonstrating the method for bisecting line segments, "He draws, for instance, a black line of an inch in length" which "as it is there used, . . . represents all particular lines whatsoever" (PHK, Intro §12). In this way,

the geometer considers [lines] abstracting from their magnitude. Which does not imply that he forms an abstract idea, but only that he cares not what the particular magnitude is, whether great or small, but looks on that as a thing indifferent to the demonstration (§126).

Although the particular line in question is finite in extension and, therefore, according to Berkeley, has only finitely many parts, it is a sign of all line segments, of any magnitude whatsoever. Berkeley says that,

Because there is no number of parts so great, but it is possible there may be a line containing more, the inch-line is said to contain parts more than any assignable number; which is true, not of the inch taken absolutely, but only for the things signified by it (§127).

Berkeley's idea seems to be this: just as in demonstrating that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle is equal to two right angles we use some particular triangle, but without making use, in our demonstration, of any of the features that distinguish it from other triangles, so in geometry more generally, we consider line segments without considering their magnitude. These two cases cannot, however, be precisely analogous, since if they were our results would have to apply to all line segments, regardless of magnitude, when in fact some of our results (for instance, those involving incommensurables) apply to *no* line segments. Instead, Berkeley seems to think that any given geometric proof or construction requires sufficiently long lines, but since the inch-line stands for all lines, and lines can be arbitrarily long, there are some sufficiently long lines among those it stands for. Thus our geometric results all contain an implicit proviso, 'for sufficiently large figures ...' However, for some geometric results, such as those involving incommensurables, *no* figure is in fact sufficiently large. This is because incommensurable lines have no finite ratio to one another, but Berkeley's lines are all made up of finitely many points. Still, the larger the (finite) figure the more nearly it is capable of approximating the theorem (Jesseph 1993, 74).

Here geometry functions similarly to algebra. We perform certain operations (e.g. the operations involved in Euclidean constructions) which we can only perform by *considering the signs while ignoring the particular ideas they signify*, and this allows us to come to general conclusions which we can apply in practice to any particular figures we wish. As applied to particular figures, many of our results turn out to be mere approximations. However, as Berkeley says, "whatever is useful in geometry and promotes the benefit of human life, does still remain unshaken" (PHK, §131). Berkeley's contemporaries never thought that geometry could, in practice, be applied as more than

an approximation in the first place: most of them held, with Descartes, that no physical object is ever more than an approximation to the simple geometrical natures we know (CSM, 2:262). Thus geometry, in its practical uses, was already acknowledged to involve an idealization from the physical facts; what Berkeley adds is that there are no objects of any sort – physical, psychological, or logical – of which the theorems of geometry hold precisely. Instead of being a precise description of abstract objects, Berkeley takes geometry to be an approximate description of the objects of sensation.²⁷

3.3.3 Physics

In the *Principles*, Berkeley gives a simple account of the aim of natural philosophy. The natural philosophers, he says, “frame general rules from the phenomena, and afterwards derive the phenomena from those rules” (PHK, §108). The ‘explanation’ which takes place in natural philosophy does not involve assigning efficient causes, but simply subsumes particular phenomena under general laws (PHK, §§104-106; Stoneham 2002, 108). The aim of this activity is to make practically useful predictions (PHK, §107). A question, however, arises regarding the status and meaning of various assertions made by natural philosophers. In the *Principles*, Berkeley criticizes Newton’s notions of absolute space and time as meaningless because empirically empty, but uncritically accepts the notion of force (PHK, §§110-117; Downing 2005, 236). In *De Motu* (1721), Berkeley sets out to rectify this oversight by carefully examining the use of theoretical terms and ‘mathematical hypotheses’ in physics (Peterschmitt 2003, 184-185n2, *et passim*). In doing so, he makes significant advances toward his mature theory of language.

27. Cf. Alc, §4.23: “Does any one find fault with the exactness of geometrical rules, because no one in practice can attain to it? The perfection of a rule is useful, even though it is not reached. Many may approach what all may fall short of.”

Berkeley's concern in *De Motu* was to defend Newton's mechanics from the charge of unsavory metaphysical commitments which had been advanced by Leibniz and his followers (see, e.g., Leibniz and Clarke [1717] 1969, §§9.118-123).²⁸ At the same time, although Berkeley suppresses his immaterialism in *De Motu* (Downing 1995a, 198; 2005, 237), he wishes to defend his metaphysics and theology from any encroachment on the part of the physicists (DM, §§42, 71-72; Peterschmitt 2003, 185-186, 197). Berkeley shares the positivist aim of separating science from metaphysics for the protection of science, but, unlike the positivists, he regards this separation as likewise protecting metaphysics and theology (Popper [1953–1954] 1970, 140-141).²⁹

The linguistic element of *De Motu* is Berkeley's argument for the claim that “‘Force’, ‘gravity’, ‘attraction’ and similar terms are useful for reasoning, and for calculations about motion and moving bodies, but not for understanding the simple nature of motion itself or for designating so many distinct qualities” (DM, §17). What concerns us here is Berkeley's account of the function of these terms, that is, the question of *how* they manage to be useful without designating anything. In order to answer this question,

28. Earlier treatments of *De Motu* saw it primarily as an attack on Newton. See, e.g., Popper (1953–1954) 1970, 130. However, it is now widely recognized that Berkeley's main targets are Leibniz and his followers. See, e.g., Jesseph 1992b, §2.3; Downing 1995a, 199; 2005, 238 and Clarke's footnotes in DM, §§2, 9, 15-20, 44, as well as Jesseph's footnotes to §§2, 8-9, 14-20, 43-45 in Jesseph 1992. Berkeley may also have theological criticisms of realism about physical forces in mind. See, e.g., Malebranche (1674–1675) 1997, §6.2.3. Of course, Berkeley's project will require a 'rational reconstruction' of Newtonian mechanics, and Newton would likely have rejected many of Berkeley's suggestions, so Berkeley should not be seen as defending Newton or Newtonianism generally; what he aims to do is to show that Newtonian *mechanics* can be defended without defending Newtonian *metaphysics* (Peterschmitt 2003, 184-187, 196-197). Luc Peterschmitt aptly characterizes Berkeley as an 'ultra-Newtonian' who seeks “to defend Newtonianism against its own metaphysical ghosts” (197). Cf. also Moked 1988, 62: “[Berkeley] is very keen . . . to draw a distinction between the main scientific contributions of Newton . . . and those utterances and tenets of the Newtonians, and of the great man himself, which may be regarded as metaphysical assumptions.”

29. For a detailed account of Berkeley's demarcation of metaphysics from natural philosophy and its historical significance, see Schliesser 2005.

Berkeley provides an account of the practice of physics which fills in the details of the simple account from the *Principles*. Berkeley writes that

in mechanical philosophy, the principles are said to be those things in which are grounded and contained the whole discipline, those primary laws of motion which are confirmed by experience and are refined by reason and rendered universal. Those laws of motion are appropriately called principles, because both general mechanical theorems and particular explanations are derived from them (DM, §36).

Here, as in the *Principles*, a ‘particular explanation’ is just the subsumption of some particular observation under a general rule (§§37, 69). Berkeley gives the following basic account of scientific methodology. From experience, one notices certain generalizations. These are confirmed by further observation, then ‘refined by reason and rendered universal,’ i.e. they are given some particular precise formulation which is proposed as a fundamental law. It is possible either to apply the fundamental laws directly to the explanation of particular phenomena, or else to derive ‘general mechanical theorems,’ i.e. useful generalizations of narrower scope than the fundamental law, from them, and explain the phenomena using these. However, the laws of physics are not simple generalizations like ‘all ravens are black.’³⁰ Their structure is much more complex, and often involves technical notions like ‘force.’ According to Berkeley, as in geometry so “in mechanics, notions are initially established – that is, definitions, and first general statements about motion – from which more remote and less general conclusions are subsequently deduced by a mathematical method” (§38). The aim, then, is to begin with a set of definitions and axioms to which a ‘mathematical method’ may be applied, in

30. Maudlin 2007, ch. 1, esp. pp. 10-14 makes a strong case for the claim that the assumption that laws have this form is *not* a harmless idealization and has seriously misled philosophers in their thinking about the laws of nature.

order to determine “the motions of any parts of the system of the world, and the phenomena that depend on them” (DM, §38).

This theory is quite similar to the account of laws adopted by David Lewis, according to which “a contingent generalization is a *law of nature* if and only if it appears as a theorem (or axiom) in each of the true deductive systems that achieves a best combination of simplicity and strength” (D. Lewis 1973, 73). However, Berkeley does not say that the ‘principles,’ as he calls them, of mechanics must be those of each system which ‘achieves a best combination of simplicity and strength;’ it is enough that they are part of a system which we adopt and successfully use in predictions.³¹

What is crucial for our purposes is that terms such as ‘force’ are introduced in formal definitions for use, along with axioms, in a deductive system whose aim is to predict phenomena. By such a deductive system, “the system of the world would be subjected to human calculations” (DM, §66). It is precisely by their role in this system that terms like ‘force’ come to have meaning (Peterschmitt 2003, 191). As Lisa Downing says, these terms “function purely formally in the theory, like formal variables” (Downing 2005, 249). The terms in question are, then, quite similar to the constant ‘*i*’ which we have previously discussed: they cannot be substituted for any particular ideas, but instead are manipulated by mathematical rules and take their meaning from the role they play in these calculations.

The word ‘force’ is, however, importantly different from the constant ‘*i*,’ and it is here that *De Motu* constitutes a significant advance toward Berkeley’s mature theory of language. ‘Force’ does not occur only in calculations; it can be used as an ordinary

31. There is, as Peterschmitt observes, a conventionalist strain to Berkeley’s philosophy of science (Peterschmitt 2008, 31): it must be a system which *we adopt*. Peterschmitt suggests that Berkeley’s views can, in this respect, be usefully compared with Poincaré’s. As James Van Cleve pointed out to me, there are also similarities to Quine (Quine 1960, 19-25, 161). On the objectivity of natural laws, and of the other elements of the perceived world, see chapter 8.

English noun, and is treated as if it were the name of a quality possessed by bodies. Yet it is radically unlike ‘redness,’ in that one can point to particular instances of redness but cannot, in the same way, point to particular instances of force.³² The meaning of ‘force’ is fixed not by ostension, but by the definitions and axioms of Newtonian mechanics, yet it is able to work its way into ordinary English and be applied to the world. Berkeley cautions that we should not lose sight of the crucial difference between ‘force’ and ‘redness.’ These two words are governed by different rules, and the difference is analogous to the difference between ‘*i*’ and ‘2.’

3.4 Conclusion

In the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley attacks the Theory of Meanings, an approach to mental representation, linguistic representation, and the relationship between them which was endorsed by thinkers across the entire spectrum of seventeenth century philosophy. According to the Theory of Meanings, there are certain entities, ‘meanings,’ which, by their intrinsic nature, represent, and the role of linguistic conventions is just to link words to meanings. Berkeley’s primary argument against this view is his claim that nothing could possibly be intrinsically well-suited to represent generally. As we have seen, Berkeley’s argument can be escaped only by taking representation as primitive. Considerations of parsimony therefore recommend searching for an alternative. In this early period, Berkeley begins to develop such an alternative. His fundamental claim is that understanding words is not a matter of linking them to meanings, but of following the rules governing their use in language. To this extent, at least, Anthony Flew is correct in regarding Berkeley as a precursor of the later Wittgenstein (Flew [1974]

32. The significance of this difference will be examined at length in chapter 6.

1993). In fact, anticipations of Wittgenstein can be found not only, as Flew observes, in *Alciphron* VII, but throughout Berkeley's career, beginning as early as the *Manuscript Introduction*. It is, however, only in *Alciphron* 7 that Berkeley pulls the threads together into something like a general theory of language. It is to this treatment we now turn.

Chapter 4

A Commentary on *Alciphron* VII

Having traced the development of Berkeley's theory of language prior to 1732, we turn now to Berkeley's mature theory as contained, primarily, in *Alciphron* VII. I begin, in this chapter, with a detailed commentary on that text before turning, in the following three chapters, to an examination of the philosophical issues arising from Berkeley's theory. Beginning with this kind of textual focus will help to protect against anachronistic readings of Berkeley's concerns, arguments, and ideas. It will also, perhaps more importantly, give me the opportunity to defend, from a textual and contextual perspective, my contention that there is such a thing as Berkeley's mature theory of language and that it is contained in *Alciphron* VII. This contention has come under attack from two directions. First, Ian Hacking has argued at length that none of the British empiricists had a 'theory of meaning' in the post-Fregean sense. According to Hacking, "theories of meaning have to do with the essentially public features of language, whatever it is that is common to you and me, in respect of the word 'violet', which makes it possible for us to talk about the flowers in Knapwell wood" (Hacking 1974, 50). Although early modern philosophers made casual remarks about the 'common acceptance' of words, Hacking claims that they were always more concerned in their talk about meaning, with the logical and epistemological facts about our private ideas than about these 'common acceptations.'

Second, some interpreters have seen *Alciphron* VII as engaged in a narrow apologetic exercise, to show that the philosophy of language assumed in a certain objection

to Christianity is incorrect, without providing any comprehensive theory of language in its place (Bennett 1971, 53-55; Berman 1994, ch. 6; Jakapi 2002b, 30-32). Interpreters who have this narrow view of the significance of *Alciphron* VII differ greatly among themselves as to what exactly Berkeley's apologetic strategy is. The most influential 'narrow' interpretation is due to David Berman. Berman argues that Berkeley should be seen as anticipating 20th century emotivism about moral and religious discourse. 20th century emotivism was a theory about a particular narrow domain of discourse; it was not a general philosophy of language. Similarly, according to Berman, one can find in *Alciphron* a "linguistic distinction which [Berkeley] was the first to draw: between cognitive statements which inform . . . and emotive utterances which produce emotions, dispositions, and actions" (Berman 1994, 148). According to this interpretation, Berkeley gives only a fragment of a philosophy of language in *Alciphron* VII, dealing only with the special case of (emotive) religious mysteries.

Against both of these claims, I will argue that, although Berkeley's 18th century context and his religious concerns make for certain differences as compared to later philosophies of language, it is indeed one of Berkeley's aims in this dialogue to "make sense of our daily practice" of spoken and written language in general (*Alc*, §7.8). These, Berkeley recognizes, are public, social practices governed by conventional rules of speech, thought, and action. *Alciphron* VII, I will argue, contains a 'theory of meaning' in what Hacking identifies as the post-Fregean sense of that phrase. The theory of meaning in question anticipates, in certain respects, the later Wittgenstein.¹ Since Berkeley's aim is to "make sense of our daily practice," he focuses on how bits of language are used, what the purposes of these uses are, and how they interact with other aspects of human social behavior. Furthermore, although we can distinguish different types of linguistic

1. In regarding *Alciphron* VII as providing a general theory of language similar to Wittgenstein's I follow Flew (1974) 1993.

rules, Berkeley recognizes no sharp distinction between different domains of discourse (cf. Olscamp 1970b, 148; also see §3.2, above).

I divide the relevant portion of *Alciphron* VII into six parts. In the first part (§§1-4), Alciphron provides an argument against Christianity based on Locke's theory of language. In the second part (§§5-7), Euphranor summarizes Berkeley's reasons for rejecting Locke's theory. Next, Euphranor presents his alternative theory of language (§§8-11), and applies this theory of language to analyze two distinct, but similar, varieties of assent to propositions, which he calls 'faith' (§§11-13) and 'science' (§§14-16). In the sixth and final portion of the text (§§16-18), Euphranor summarizes the preceding discussion and draws a number of general conclusions from it.

4.1 Alciphron's Critique of Religious Mysteries (§§1-4)

Most of *Alciphron* is taken up by a debate between two Christian protagonists, Euphranor and Crito, and their 'freethinking' opponents, Alciphron and Lysicles. The seventh dialogue begins with the title character's admission that the preceding dialogues have provided "several probable reasons . . . for embracing the Christian faith." However, Alciphron insists, "those reasons, being only probable, can never prevail against absolute certainty and demonstration." More specifically, the arguments adduced for Christianity rest on history and tradition and so, at bottom, on testimony, which is a ground of probable belief, but never of certainty. As a result, if there were a *demonstration* of the falsity of Christianity – if Christianity could be shown to contain not merely "things odd and unaccountable" but "metaphysical absurdities and absolute impossibilities" – then the probable arguments would be rendered irrelevant. "To be plain," Alciphron says, "no testimony can make nonsense sense: no moral evidence can make contradictions

consistent” (Alc, §7.1). Alciphron draws this account of the epistemological situation from Locke (EHU, §§4.18.5-10), and Euphranor accepts it on Berkeley’s behalf.²

After securing Euphranor’s promise that if Christianity can be shown to contain nonsense or contradictions he will “have nothing more to say” in its defense, Alciphron indicates the particular charge he will make against Christianity. His accusation is that among the essential teachings of Christianity are to be found certain doctrines, the so-called ‘mysteries,’ which are really no more than “empty notions, or, to speak more properly, . . . mere forms of speech, which mean nothing, and are of no use to mankind” (Alc, §7.1). This accusation, and the argument which follows, is drawn from John Toland’s notorious *Christianity Not Mysterious* (Toland 1696).³ Toland’s book begins with a lengthy account (without attribution) of Locke’s epistemology and philosophy of language, then proceeds to argue that, given these theories, no meaning can be assigned to the so-called ‘mysteries’ of the Christian faith. Toland defines a ‘mystery’ as “a thing of its own Nature inconceivable” (66). Because the thing is inconceivable, the words with which we confess our belief in the mystery are not associated with any ideas (135). But, according to the Theory of Meanings, if we have no ideas, the words are meaningless and we might as well be confessing “that something call’d *Blictri* [has] a Being in Nature” (138).⁴

2. On Locke’s religious epistemology, and Berkeley’s endorsement of it, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(a\)](#).

3. On the importance of this work to Berkeley’s intellectual context, and its direct and indirect influence on Berkeley’s thought, see Belfrage 1985; Berman 1994, 11-17, 148-150; Pearce, [forthcoming\(a\)](#); [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §8.

4. As Roomet Jakapi points out (Jakapi 2007, 189-192; cf. Jakapi 2002a, 404-406), discussions of mysteries in this period, including those found in Toland and Berkeley, often slide back and forth between several senses of ‘mystery,’ including: (a) certain (alleged) supernatural realities (e.g. the afterlife); (b) certain propositions, beliefs, or teachings *about* those realities (e.g. the proposition, belief, or teaching *that there will be a bodily resurrection of the dead*); and (c) certain traditional formulas in which those beliefs and teachings are expressed (e.g. the statement, in the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting”). This can be observed in Toland’s switch from treating

Toland's charge was that it was impossible genuinely to believe doctrines such as Trinitarianism because there were no ideas behind the words which could be the elements of a 'mental proposition' (see [EHU](#), §4.5.2). In Alciphron's mouth, this is transformed into the charge that Christianity prescribes certain "forms of speech, which mean nothing, and are of no use to mankind" (§7.1). These are, in fact, two distinct charges, although those who accept the Theory of Meanings will be likely to confound them. First, it is charged that the words in question *mean nothing*. If my account of the Theory of Meanings and Berkeley's opposition to it is accepted, then this phrase should be taken quite strictly and literally as the accusation *that there is no thing which those words mean*, or, equivalently, *that there is no thing which is the meaning of those words*. Within the Lockean framework, this is essentially identical to Toland's explicit charge, that the words do not stand for any ideas. The second accusation is that the words in question "are of no use to mankind." For proponents of the Theory of Meanings, these two charges can hardly be separated: the words in question *have no meanings*, hence they are *not meaningful*, hence they are *not useful*. This is the charge which Alciphron will press, and Euphranor will answer, in this dialogue. Euphranor's strategy will be, essentially, the reverse of Alciphron's: he will argue that the words in question are indeed useful, and if useful, then meaningful. However, Euphranor concedes that the words have no meanings. Hence the conclusion which must be drawn is that being meaningful need not involve having a meaning, that being significant need not involve signifying something.

Alciphron begins pressing his charge by laying out the Theory of Meanings ([Alc](#), §7.2). Berkeley's characterization of the Theory of Meanings should by now be familiar and so need not detain us. Alciphron then claims that, despite the wide acceptance of

mysteries as inconceivable *things* to regarding them as meaningless *words*, a switch which is also reflected in Alciphron's presentation of the argument.

the Theory of Meanings as a theory, people often go on using words to which they can connect no ideas, and this is a source of confusion and strife.

After this, Alciphron recites Locke's account of knowledge as "the perception of the connexion or disagreement between ideas," and of opinion or faith as 'weaker' forms of assent, which likewise involve joining or separating ideas ([Alc](#), §7.3; see [EHU](#), §§4.1.2, 4.14.4). Since all forms of assent involve the joining or separating of ideas, it is impossible to assent to that of which we have no ideas. As a result, these meaningless words cannot be expressions of genuine belief.

Having laid out Locke's theory, Alciphron remarks, "It were needless to illustrate what shines by its own light . . . My endeavour shall be only to apply it in the present case" ([Alc](#), §7.3). Locke's theory, Alciphron supposes, is evidently true. If Christianity is to be defended, Christian doctrine must demonstrate its Lockean credentials: the ideas corresponding to each word must be exhibited. This, Alciphron is confident, cannot be done.

At this point, Alciphron goes for the throat:

Grace is the main point of the Christian dispensation . . . Only one thing I should desire to be informed of, to wit, What is the clear and distinct idea marked by the word Grace? I presume a man may know the bare meaning of a term, without going into depth of all those learned inquiries. This surely is an easy matter, provided there is an idea annexed to such a term. And if there is not, it can be neither the subject of a rational dispute, nor the object of real faith . . . For there can be no assent where there are no ideas: and where there is no assent there can be no faith: and what cannot be, that no man is obliged to. This is as clear as any thing in *Euclid* (§7.4).

It is noteworthy that Berkeley's presentation makes the radical nature of Toland's argument clearer than Toland himself had:⁵ if Toland is correct, it follows that *no one has ever been a Christian*, for a Christian is, *inter alia*, one who believes in divine grace,⁶ but no one has ever had any idea of divine grace, and no one can believe in what she has no idea of.

Alciphron makes a point of going after a central element of the Christian faith, a belief confessed by the ordinary church-goer, rather than "any nice disputed points of school divinity" ([Alc](#), §7.3); but why does Alciphron believe that 'grace' is meaningless? Against the meaningfulness of 'grace,' Alciphron makes two points. First, he notes that

no point has created more controversy in the church than this doctrine of Grace. What disputes about its nature, extent, and effects, about universal, efficacious, sufficient, preventing, irresistible grace, have employed the pens of Protestant as well as Popish Divines, of *Jansenists* and *Molinists*,

5. The reason Toland does not put his point in this way is that he wants to argue, not that Christian faith is false, unjustified, or impossible, but rather that 'mysteries,' such as the doctrine of the Trinity, form no part of authentic Christianity. Berkeley has at least two reasons for framing Toland's argument differently. First, he refuses to countenance the possibility of a non-Trinitarian Christianity. Second, he evidently thinks that, if Toland's argument worked at all, it would work equally well against the concept of grace, which is arguably even more central to Christianity (or at least orthodox Protestantism) than Trinitarianism.

6. Samuel Rickless suggested to me that Locke, although he holds that Christians ought to believe in divine grace, would object to making this part of the *definition* of 'Christian.' To this I reply, first, that Locke describes Christianity as 'the covenant of grace' ([LW](#), 7:103-104, 124, 155), as contrasted with 'the Law' or 'covenant of works;' hence he would not disagree with Alciphron's claim that "Grace is the main point of the Christian dispensation." Nevertheless, it is true that Locke's central contention in *The Reasonableness of Christianity* is that there is only one article of faith necessary for salvation, namely, that Jesus is the Messiah. It might therefore be thought that one may be a party to the 'covenant of grace' without actually believing in grace, and hence that Locke would deny that Alciphron's argument leads to the conclusion that no one has ever been a Christian. However, it is not clear that even this much is true, for Locke glosses 'Messiah' as "the Saviour that was promised" (7:23; cf. 24-25), and this would seem to build the concept of grace (i.e. God's action to save the undeserving) into the very concept of Messiah, which is crucially involved in Locke's one article of Christian faith. Finally, it is to be noted that Locke's view here was widely seen as heterodox in the extreme (see, e.g., Edwards 1696; Milner 1700, ch. 14). I think it is safe to say that Berkeley, as a member of the Anglican clergy, would find the inclusion of belief in grace in the definition of 'Christian' unobjectionable.

of *Lutherans, Calvinists, and Arminians*, as I have not the least curiosity to know, so I need not say (Alc, §7.4).

We may, for present purposes, safely follow Alciphron in refraining from inquiry into the details of these disputes. It is, however, quite true that the proper understanding of grace has been among the most contentious issues in Western Christianity from the Reformation to the present. If the disputants did not share a common idea of grace, and so were engaged in “mere verbal trifling,” that would explain the intractability of the disputes (Alc, §7.4; cf. EHU, §3.10.12; PHK, Intro §§21-22). On the basis of introspection, Alciphron believes that this is indeed the case: “whenever I laid aside the word *Grace*, and looked into my own mind, [I found] a perfect vacuity or privation of all ideas” (Alc, §7.4).

Having dispensed with the alleged idea of grace, Alciphron goes on to question why people thought there was such an idea in the first place.⁷ For this he gives two reasons. First, “a word often heard and pronounced is [commonly] believed intelligible, for no other reason but because it is familiar” (§7.4). Second, Alciphron thinks that many of our ways of speaking about grace are drawn from perfectly intelligible ways of speaking about physical objects. Grace, in the sense under discussion, is meant to be “an active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man, distinct from every natural power or motive.” Alciphron observes that “Men speak of this holy principle as of something that acts, moves, and determines, taking their ideas from corporeal things, from motion and the force of *momentum* of bodies” (§7.4). Grace of course cannot literally be a thing like that, but the similarity of the vocabulary creates, according to Alciphron, an illusion of intelligibility.

7. Interestingly, this parallels Berkeley’s attack on abstract ideas in the Introduction to the *Principles* (see above, §2.1).

Alciphron concludes that ‘grace’ is meaningless, and hence the so-called ‘doctrines of grace,’ about which there is so much dispute, are not beliefs or doctrines at all, but rather empty forms of words, which are both meaningless and useless. Furthermore, he claims, “The same method of reasoning may be applied by any man of sense to confute all other the most essential articles of the Christian faith” (Alc, §7.5). This completes Alciphron’s case for the claim that, probable arguments notwithstanding, Christianity must be rejected.

4.2 Euphranor’s Refutation of the Theory of Meanings (§§5-7)

At this point Euphranor takes the reins and begins to question Alciphron about the Theory of Meanings and its consequences. Euphranor observes, “every time the word man occurs in reading or conversation, I am not conscious that the particular distinct idea of a man is excited in my mind” (§7.5).⁸ This prompts Alciphron to summarize Locke’s theory of abstract ideas, and claim that Euphranor does indeed have the abstract general idea of a man in his mind each time he hears the word ‘man.’

In response to this, Euphranor summarizes the arguments against abstract ideas from the Introduction to the *Principles* (Alc, §7.6). Alciphron is certain that there must be some unnoticed error in Euphranor’s reasoning, since without abstract ideas general names would be meaningless, with the result that there would be no general propositions and hence no general knowledge. This is, of course, precisely the concern that Berkeley thinks led to the positing of abstract ideas in the first place (see above, §2.1).

8. Sections 5-7 were excised from the 1752 edition, and the subsequent sections re-numbered. All references here are to the 1732 edition unless otherwise noted.

Euphranor responds by introducing Berkeley's account of general names and ideas (see above, §3.1). "[W]ords become general," Euphranor says, "by being made to stand indiscriminately for all particular ideas, which from a mutual resemblance belong to the same kind . . . a particular idea may become general by being used to stand for or represent other ideas" (Alc, §7.7).

Alciphron, still wedded to the Theory of Meanings, takes this to mean that each time a general name is pronounced, I have in mind some one particular idea. (For instance, that every time I hear the word 'man' I must think of either Peter or Paul or . . .) Euphranor, however, insists that this is phenomenologically implausible. Alciphron, on reflection, agrees and admits that he was led to think this by the Theory of Meanings and not by introspection.

This passage is noteworthy in that it asserts the independence of linguistic and mental representation. Not only do general terms not stand for abstract general ideas; they do not stand for Berkeleian general ideas either. Words and ideas can become general by the very same process of adopting conventional rules, and there is no logical or temporal priority between these two processes.

4.3 Euphranor's Theory of Language (§§8-11)

At the end of §7, Alciphron questions what other use words can have besides suggesting ideas. At the beginning of §8, Euphranor proposes to "inquire what [the use of words] is? and see if we can make sense of our daily practice." As I indicated at the beginning of the chapter, I take this line seriously, and literally: this section and those which follow aim to provide a theory which will make sense of the practice of spoken and written language.

Euphranor begins by noting that words are a species of a broader genus, namely, *signs*. Some light may therefore be shed on the nature of words by consideration of some examples of simpler sign systems (cf. Wittgenstein [1958a] 2009, 105-106). The first example Euphranor considers is the use of poker chips. These “are used,” he says, “not for their own sake, but only as signs substituted for money, as words are for ideas.” However, part of the point of having chips is that one need not “every time these counters are used throughout the whole progress of a game . . . frame an idea of the distinct sum or value that each represents.” Alciphron agrees that it is sufficient, for the counters to serve their purpose, that “the players at first agree on their respective values, and at last substitute those values in their stead” (Alc, §7.8).

The second example is an arithmetic calculation in which “the figures stand for pounds, shillings, and pence.” Here again, Euphranor says, it is not necessary “throughout the whole progress of the operation, in each step to form ideas of pounds, shillings, and pence.” Alciphron agrees that “it will suffice if in the conclusion those figures direct our actions with respect to things” (§7.8). This is, clearly, the sort of ‘computing in signs’ Berkeley spoke about in his discussion of the use of mathematical symbols in the *Principles* (PHK, §121; see above, §3.3.1).

From the poker chip case, Euphranor draws the conclusion that “words may not be insignificant, although they should not, every time they are used, excite the ideas they signify in our minds, it being sufficient, that we have it in our power to substitute things or ideas for their signs when there is occasion” (Alc, §7.8). It should be noted, first, that Euphranor here gives a *sufficient* condition for the meaningfulness of a word: if there is something that can be ‘substituted’ for a word, then that word is meaningful. As will emerge, Berkeley does not take this to be a *necessary* condition of meaningfulness. Second, the thing substituted is described as a ‘thing or idea.’ Berkeley’s immaterialism

is not in play in *Alciphron*, so Euphranor should not be read as collapsing the distinction between things and ideas as Philonous does (DHP, 244). Rather, Euphranor makes this disjunctive claim in order to be neutral on whether the reference of words to things is mediated by ideas as ideist versions of the Theory of Meanings suppose.

From the arithmetic case, Euphranor draws the conclusion “that there may be another use of words, besides that of marking or suggesting distinct ideas, to wit, the influencing our conduct and actions.” This does seem to be what Alciphron had conceded in response to the case: he said that it would ‘suffice’ if the conclusion of the calculation was action-guiding. Alciphron does not say what this would suffice *for*, but Euphranor interprets Alciphron to mean that it would suffice for the usefulness of that application of signs. Euphranor goes on to say that the influencing of our actions

may be done either by forming rules for us to act by, or by raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions in our minds. A discourse, therefore, that directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action may, it seems, be useful and significant, although the words whereof it is composed should not bring each a distinct idea into our minds (Alc, §7.8).

Since influencing actions is a legitimate use of signs in general, and words in particular, signs that accomplish this end are useful, regardless of the means by which they accomplish it. There is a variety of means by which words do this. For instance, a sentence could provide an explicit instruction, which would be adopted and followed by the hearer, or it could put the hearer into some kind of affective state which would tend to lead to the action. As long as this end is accomplished, Euphranor claims, that application of words is useful *and significant*. It is evidently a background assumption that a word or other sign is meaningful (or significant) whenever it accomplishes the

purpose for which it is intended (cf. [DHP](#), 223).⁹ Alciphron does not question any of these claims. Thus Euphranor has at this point undermined Alciphron's inferences: from the fact that a word is not associated with any idea, it does *not* follow that the word is meaningless or useless: meaningfulness need not involve having a meaning.

Next Euphranor argues that since ideas are "altogether inactive" there cannot possibly be an idea of "an active mind or spirit." The conclusion is "that those words, which denote an active principle, soul, or spirit, do not, in a strict and proper sense, stand for ideas" ([Alc](#), §7.8) Of course, however, these words are meaningful.¹⁰

Having presented three lines of argument against the Theory of Meanings, Euphranor repeats the claim that the Theory of Meanings is the source of the doctrine of abstraction. Alciphron asks whether Euphranor rejects abstraction entirely, and Euphranor makes the qualification familiar from the Introduction to the *Principles* ([PHK](#), Intro §10): he can separate in thought "those things that can really exist, or be really perceived asunder," but cannot "frame abstract general ideas" ([Alc](#), §7.8). Alciphron persists in endorsing the Theory of Meanings, at which point Euphranor urges him to attempt to "frame an idea of number in abstract exclusive of all signs, words, and things numbered." Alciphron concedes that he cannot.

Euphranor now observes that "though, it seems, neither you nor I can form distinct simple ideas of number, we can nevertheless make a very proper and significant use of numeral names" (§7.8). The use of the word 'proper' here provides further evidence against Hacking's thesis that none of the British empiricists had a theory of meaning:

9. A question arises here as to *who* intended the word or sign for that purpose. For reasons discussed in §3.2, above, I believe Berkeley means, or at least ought to mean, to refer to the collective intention of the community by whose conventions the sign is governed. For further discussion, see §5.3, below.

10. In a footnote, Berkeley refers the reader to [PHK](#), Intro §20 and [PHK](#), §135 for details.

‘propriety of speech’ or ‘propriety of language’ is connected by Berkeley and other writers of the period with the ‘common’ (or ‘vulgar’) ‘acceptation’ (or ‘use’) of language, phrases which, as Hacking explicitly acknowledges, clearly have to do with the public rules of linguistic usage (DHP, 216, 239-240, 247; EHU, §§3.9.8, 3.11.11, 3.11.24; Hacking 1974, 47-49).¹¹ The question here is whether ‘propriety of language,’ i.e. the public conventions governing the use of words, requires that one have a certain idea each time one hears or says a particular word. The answer is ‘no.’

Alciphron had earlier claimed that ‘force,’ as contrasted with ‘grace,’ was a perfectly meaningful word, corresponding to a clear and distinct idea (Alc, §7.4).¹² Euphranor now suggests that we revisit this assertion and “examine what idea we can frame of force abstracted from body, motion, and outward sensible effect” (§7.9). He doubts that such an idea will be found. This corresponds to Alciphron’s second complaint against ‘grace,’ that no corresponding idea is to be found in introspection. Alciphron concedes that the case of ‘force’ is the same as that of ‘grace.’

Next, symmetrically, we come to Alciphron’s first complaint, his claim that the apparent intractability of the disputes about grace is evidence that ‘grace’ does not signify any common idea. Euphranor lists a number of English and Latin terms closely connected to force, and remarks that “no small controversies have arisen about the notions or definitions of these terms” (§7.9). These are the same controversies which Berkeley,

11. Berkeley also uses the phrase ‘propriety of language’ at PHK, Intro §20 and PHK, §115. Locke’s uses of the term ‘propriety’ with this meaning are far too frequent for a comprehensive enumeration. To list just a few examples, see EHU, §§1.1.5, 2.9.1, 2.21.16, 2.30.4, 2.32.1, 2.32.17, 4.4.9-10. In fact, Locke’s *Essay* does not contain a single usage of the word ‘propriety’ with any other meaning than this.

12. Alciphron characterizes Locke’s theory as requiring a clear and distinct idea for a word to be meaningful. This characterization of Locke’s view is drawn from Stillingfleet, and is, as Locke himself pointed out (LW, 4:28-29), incorrect. (I have elsewhere marshaled evidence that the Locke-Stillingfleet correspondence was a significant influence on Berkeley’s thought; see Pearce, [forthcoming\(a\)](#).) I am here concerned primarily with Berkeley’s positive theory, and not his arguments against Locke, so I will not pursue this issue farther.

in *De Motu*, had sought to deflate. These disputes do not, however, prevent it from being that case that “there are very evident propositions or theorems relating to force, which contain useful truths” ([Alc](#), §7.10).

It is interesting that Euphranor here says that the theorems in question *contain* useful truths. In Berkeley’s view, the job of the physicist is to “frame general rules from the phenomena, and afterward derive the phenomena from those rules” ([PHK](#), §108). In the more sophisticated theory of *De Motu*, fundamental physics aims to discover certain ‘principles’ from which “both general mechanical theorems and particular explanations are derived” ([DM](#), §36). One might therefore question whether Berkeley’s theory requires the theorems themselves to be true, or whether false propositions with true entailments might suffice for the sort of explanation at which fundamental physics aims.¹³ These issues will recur in chapter 8 where the role of these laws in the language of nature will be considered. For now, however, the key question is whether *any* statement containing ‘force’ (and, by analogy, ‘grace’) is on Berkeley’s view true, or whether it is only the particular phenomena, stripped of ‘mathematical hypotheses,’ which count as true. This question is answered at the end of §10, where Euphranor says that there are “divers true and useful propositions concerning [grace] as well as [force].” The question of *how* these propositions manage to be true will be examined in more detail in chapter 7, below.

Euphranor’s main aim in §10 is to argue that our lack of an idea does not prevent the word ‘force’ from serving its purpose in the discourse of physics. As a result, we may conclude by analogy that the lack of an idea attached to ‘grace’ is no evidence that this word fails in its intended purpose. Just as “by means of the doctrine of force, men arrive

13. A theory of the latter sort is defended by Cartwright [1983](#).

at the knowledge of many inventions in Mechanics, and are taught to frame engines, by means of which things difficult and otherwise impossible may be performed,” so

grace may be the object of our faith, and influence our life and actions, as a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones, although we cannot attain a distinct idea of it, separate or abstracted from God the author, from man the subject, and from virtue and piety its effects ([Alc](#), §7.10).

Euphranor now summarizes the results of the discussion. It has been concluded that “although terms are signs, yet . . . those signs may be significant, though they should not suggest ideas represented by them, provided they serve to regulate and influence our wills, passions, or conduct.” It follows from this, Euphranor says, “that the mind of man may assent to propositions containing such terms” (§7.11). Here we are speaking of assent to a ‘verbal proposition,’ i.e. a sentence. Such assent occurs when the mind is “directed or affected” by the words in the intended manner. This confirms my earlier account of ‘reward’ talk (see above, §3.2): to assent to the sentence, i.e. to accept the speaker’s assertion, is to be motivated as the speaker intends. This kind of assent does not require the having of any ideas. As a result, it is possible to assent to sentences containing ‘force’ or ‘grace:’ to do so is not to have any ideas at all, but to be in a certain affective or motivational state, or to have certain dispositions to feeling and action.

4.4 The Nature of Faith (§§11-13)

After summarizing his conclusions about the uses of language and the conditions for the significance of language, Euphranor enters into a discussion of the nature of faith. This discussion is important to Berkeley’s concerns insofar as it provides a direct response to

the Toland argument from the beginning of the dialogue by showing that it *is* possible to have faith in grace and the Trinity after all. It is relevant to our concerns insofar as faith is or involves assent to certain claims.¹⁴ From the results of the preceding sections, Euphranor will argue, against Locke and Toland, that it is possible genuinely to assent to verbal propositions (sentences) whose terms do not correspond to ideas in our minds.

Although perhaps prepared to accept the conclusion about grace, Alciphron had balked at the suggestion that it was possible, in the same way, to believe the doctrine of the Trinity. Here Euphranor argues that it is. One assents to the doctrine of the Trinity when the “doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on [one’s] mind, producing therein, love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle influencing [one’s] life and actions” (Alc, §7.11). For Berkeley, a primary aim of religious discourse is moral motivation (Pearce, [forthcoming\[b\]](#), §§4-5, 8-9). It is sufficient for the meaningfulness of this discourse that it should accomplish this end. It accomplishes this end by getting people into certain affective and/or volitional states. The people who get into those states can be said to assent to the proposition – that is, to take it to be true.

Euphranor now argues *ad hominem*, extracting from Alciphron the concession that there is faith among freethinkers as well. One may find, among the freethinkers, “a fine gentleman or lady of fashion, who are too much employed to think for themselves, and are free-thinkers at second-hand” (Alc, §7.11). These people may assent either to the doctrine of fate or the doctrine of chance (the two alternatives to the doctrine of providence) on the basis of testimony without having ideas of either fate or chance.

14. Jakapi [2002b](#) argues that the nature of assent is in fact Berkeley’s main concern in these discussions. I certainly agree that this is one of the main issues, but I take Berkeley to be more serious about understanding language in general than Jakapi does. Williford and Jakapi [2009](#) does read the dialogue as attempting to provide a general theory of language, and Jakapi has confirmed that this does indeed represent a revision of his previous view (personal correspondence, August 27, 2013).

Despite their lack of ideas, their assent to these propositions may “produce real effects, and show itself in the conduct and tenor of their lives, freeing them from the fears of superstition, and giving them a true relish of the world, with a noble indolence or indifference about what comes after.” Analogously, Christians may “believe the divinity of our Saviour, or that in him God and man make one Person . . . so far as for such faith or belief to become a real principle of life and conduct.” The effect of this ‘principle’ is that the believer will “submit to [Christ’s] government, believe his doctrine, and practise his precepts” ([Alc](#), §7.11).

Here Euphranor makes a further claim: not only is it possible to assent without having ideas, it is both possible and rational to assent despite unsolved puzzles in the doctrine. The puzzles about the Trinity and the Incarnation are analogous to puzzles about “the principle of individuation in man” and “human personal identity.” Again, Alciphron balks: “Methinks there is no such mystery in personal identity” (§7.11). Locke’s consciousness theory, Alciphron claims, is perfectly adequate. Euphranor responds with the familiar argument, more usually associated with Reid ([Reid 1786](#), ch. 3.6), that Locke’s theory gives rise to violations of the transitivity of identity. Euphranor wishes to draw from this the conclusion that unresolved puzzles about personal identity do not render belief in the persistence of persons irrational and so, by analogy, the presence of unresolved puzzles about (e.g.) the Trinity do not render belief in the Trinity irrational. Alciphron rejects this line of argument: “you will never assist my faith by puzzling my reason.” This, however, should not lead the reader to suppose that Berkeley takes the line of argument to be defective. Rather, Alciphron’s rejection plays an important role in the literary arc of the seventh dialogue, and the work as a whole. The freethinkers pride themselves on their adherence to reason, and especially on following reason rather than authority. However, Alciphron’s ally Lysicles has just suggested that “it would be

more prudent to abide by the way of wit and humour, than thus to try religion by the dry test of reason and logic” (Alc, §7.11). As we approach the end of the work, the so-called ‘freethinkers’ grow more and more stubborn and dogmatic in their assertions. Under the weight of Euphranor’s rational defense of Christianity, Alciphron and Lysicles show themselves more committed to their infidelity than to reason, so that the very accusation they had made against the faithful is retorted back on them.

Ignoring Alciphron’s remark, Euphranor asserts, “There is . . . a practical faith, or assent, which shows itself in the will and actions of a man, although his understanding may not be furnished with those abstract, precise, distinct ideas” (§7.12). Indeed, even the abstractionists must acknowledge this, for they admit that these abstract ideas are “above the talents of common men,” yet practical faith is to be found among these ‘common men.’ Practical faith thus must not be a matter of having such ideas.¹⁵

Here Crito intervenes to inveigh against those “who confound Scholasticism with Christianity.” The Scripture, Crito observes, seems little concerned with these sorts of philosophical abstractions. Upon even a cursory examination of the Bible, “Every one, whose understanding is not perverted by science falsely so called, may see that the saving faith of Christians is quite of another kind, a vital operative principle, productive of charity and obedience” (§7.12).

Alciphron, however, has a ready response. The Bible, to be sure, rarely uses technical philosophical jargon and does not seem to be concerned with engaging believers in abstract speculation. However, the Bible is not the only authoritative doctrinal standard to which Crito and Euphranor (and Berkeley) are bound: “What are we to think then of the disputes and decisions of the famous Council of *Nice*, and so many subsequent Councils? What was the intention of those venerable Fathers the *Homoousians* and the

15. On the kind of practical faith which is possible for those with limited understanding, cf. LW, 7:128-132.

Homoiousians?” (Alc, §7.12) The Council of Nicea (AD 325) was famously, and quite literally, a dispute over an iota. The winning (Athanasian) side affirmed that the Son was ὁμοούσιον, or of *the same* substance or essence as the Father, while the losing (Arian) side wished to affirm only that the Son was ὁμοιούσιον, or of *similar* substance or essence to the Father. This is, by all accounts, an abstract, technical distinction.

To this Crito responds,

Whatever their intention was, it could not be to beget nice abstracted ideas of mysteries in the mind of common Christians, this being evidently impossible: nor does it appear that the bulk of Christian men did in those days think it any part of their duty, to lay aside the words, shut their eyes, and frame those abstract ideas (§7.12).¹⁶

This, Crito insists, is yet another point of analogy between theology and physics: the aim of the disputants in the debate about force is likewise not to settle on a particular abstract idea. Crito does not say what the point of the debate about force is, but he does give an account of the theological dispute. First, he says that in the ‘management’ of the controversies “human infirmity must be supposed to have had its share” (§7.12). That is, even the orthodox may have been unduly uncharitable to their opponents, and some portions of these disputes may truly have been ‘purely verbal,’ in the sense that there was nothing at stake in selecting one formulation over another. Crito does not, however, hold that *all* of these disputes were pointless. Instead, he says, “the main end was not,

16. There is at least some evidence that Crito (and hence Berkeley) is mistaken about the history here. Hilary of Poitiers, who was not present at the Council, but lived through the period of intense controversy which followed and was an important disputant on the Athanasian side, insisted that the word ‘ὁμοούσιον’ was not so important as the belief it was used to express, which belief, he claims, both he and the entire Christian Church, held before learning to express it with this word. Indeed, he even holds that language is necessarily inadequate to express the faith of the Church. See Hilary of Poitiers *On the Councils*, §§65, 69, 79. Although the matter is not totally clear, this could easily be taken to suggest a language-independent intellectual grasp of some concept denoted by ‘ὁμοούσιον.’ Incidentally, one of the main aims of this work of Hilary’s is to answer the charge that the dispute about the iota is purely verbal.

on either side, to convey precise positive ideas to the minds of men, by the use of those contested terms, but rather a negative sense, tending to exclude Polytheism on the one hand, and Sabellianism on the other” (Alc, §7.12).¹⁷

In support of this contention, Berkeley cites the fifth century Church history of Sozomen.¹⁸ He could just as easily have cited Athanasius himself who argues at length that the aim of the Council was “to do away with the irreligious phrases of the Arians” and that, due to the Arians’ interpretive ingenuity, this could be done only by the use of the un-Scriptural word ‘ὁμοούσιον’ (Athanasius *Defence of the Nicene Definition*, §5.19). Crito’s claim, which he takes to be supported by Sozomen’s account, is that ‘ὁμοούσιον’ gets its meaning from what it excludes. For one proposition to exclude another is for the first to entail the falsity of the second, and these entailments, according to Crito, are the primary ‘sense’ which was ‘conveyed’ by the use of the word ‘ὁμοούσιον’ – that is, it they form part of that word’s meaning. This makes the comparison with force much clearer: ‘ὁμοούσιον’ is like ‘force’ and other ‘mathematical hypotheses’ in physics in that it gets its meaning (at least in part) from inference rules which connect it to other, antecedently meaningful, bits of language.

Crito’s remarks about the ‘ὁμοούσιον’ radically undermine Berman’s interpretation. Berman reads Berkeley as holding that religious mysteries are Ayer-style emotive utterances (Berman 1994, 155). Ayer holds quite explicitly that it is, strictly speaking, impossible to contradict a purely emotive utterance. This is because emotive words stand for ‘mere pseudo-concepts’ which do not stand in any logical relations to anything (Ayer

17. Sabellianism, also known as ‘modalism,’ is the view that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three ‘modes’ in which the one God is experienced by the Church. It denies that Trinitarian ways of speaking have any ontological significance.

18. Berkeley erroneously cites book 2, chapter 8. The passage Berkeley has in mind is certainly book 2, chapter 18 (contrary to Clarke, who says that Berkeley “should refer in general to Book I” (Clarke 2008, 306 note d)).

1952, 107). According to Crito, the one who affirms the ‘ὁμοούσιον’ contradicts both the polytheist and the Sabellian. Hence ‘ὁμοούσιον’ does not stand for a mere pseudo-concept, and the claim that the Son is ὁμοούσιον with the Father is not a purely emotive utterance in Ayer’s sense.¹⁹

In the face of Crito’s defense of the ‘ὁμοούσιον,’ Alciphron is undeterred. “But what shall we say,” he asks,

of so many learned and ingenious divines, who from time to time have obliged the world with new explications of mysteries, who, having themselves professedly laboured to acquire accurate ideas, would recommend their discoveries and speculations to others for articles of faith?

Crito responds by disavowing entirely this whole project of “the explication of mysteries in divinity.” The sort of ‘explication’ Crito has in mind is, apparently, the attempt to gain, and give to one’s readers, distinct ideas corresponding to the terms in which the mysteries are expressed. This, Crito says, is “as fruitless as the pursuit of the philosopher’s stone in chemistry, or the perpetual motion in mechanics” (*Alc*, §7.12), but it does not follow from this that theology as a whole, or even revealed theology, conversant about mysteries, is meaningless. The words in which the mysteries are expressed are perfectly meaningful, but meaningfulness does not require direct connection to ideas.

19. Daniele Bertini also attributes to Berkeley the view that “it would be nonsensical to reason about the Trinity” (Bertini 2010, 132). Admittedly, Berkeley does come close to saying this at one point, but it is necessary to attend to Berkeley’s exactly phrasing: “to pretend to demonstrate or reason any thing about the Trinity is absurd” (*N*, §584). The rest of the note is about demonstrating religious doctrines. I take it Berkeley’s point is simply that no part of Trinitarian dogma can be demonstrated, not that no part of Trinitarian dogma could be used as a *premise* in a demonstration. Indeed, the main point of the whole note is that there can be demonstrations in revealed religion, although the ‘principles’ of those demonstrations will be matters of faith (cf. Aquinas *Summa Theologica*, Iq1a8).

Bertini in fact takes an even stronger line than Berman, insofar as he rejects Berman’s view that Berkeley recognized such a thing as a ‘scientific’ natural theology in addition to emotive revealed theology. Bertini’s view, like Berman’s, is unable to account for Crito’s claim that the ‘ὁμοούσιον,’ i.e. the central element of Trinitarian dogma, *entails* the falsity of Sabellianism and polytheism.

Crito now suggests that the general approach which has been developed can be applied to other religious mysteries as well. He discusses, as an example, the doctrine of original sin. We are, he says, unable to frame any idea of original sin, “or of the manner of its transmission” – that is, of the manner by which Adam’s sin can lead to the guilt and corruption of his progeny. Nevertheless, “the belief thereof may produce in [one’s] mind a salutary sense of [one’s] own unworthiness, and the goodness of [one’s] Redeemer: from whence may follow good habits, and from them good actions, the genuine effects of faith” (*Alc*, §7.13). Sentences expressing the doctrine of original sin must therefore be understood as among those whose purpose is “the influencing our conduct and actions . . . by raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions in our minds” (§7.8). More generally, Crito insists that faith is “placed in the will and affections rather than in the understanding, and producing holy lives, rather than subtle theories” (§7.13). This, Crito says, is quite clear as long as “the Christian religion is considered as an institution fitted to ordinary minds, rather than to the nicer talents . . . of speculative men; and our notions about faith are accordingly taken from the commerce of the world, and practice of mankind, rather than from the peculiar systems of refiners.” In short,

one that takes his notions of faith, opinion, and assent from commonsense, and common use, and has maturely weighed the nature of signs and language, will not be so apt to controvert the wording of a mystery, or break the peace of the church, for the sake of retaining or rejecting a term (§7.13).

The emphasis here is again on ‘common use’ and the ‘practice of mankind.’ What we must examine, Crito says, is how the word ‘faith’ operates in ordinary language. When these empirical facts are combined with the correct theory of language, we will be able to see that when ordinary believers speak of having faith in the mysteries taught by the Church, the thing they are talking about is possible. (Crito, and Berkeley, would

add that, given the arguments of the earlier dialogues, we will also be able to see that the thing ordinary believers call ‘faith’ is *desirable* and *correct*; on how Berkeley would have us go about assessing such claims, see §7.2.4, below.) Now, it is certainly part of ordinary linguistic practice to describe ordinary churchgoers as assenting to, or having faith in, mysteries such as the Trinity or original sin, despite the fact that no one is under the illusion that these people have distinct abstract ideas associated with these terms. This fact is deserving of more careful examination, which promises to make clear to us the nature of “faith, opinion, and assent.”

There is, of course, a distinction between sincere and insincere professions of religion, and this is very much a part of plain language and commonsense. However, the sincerity of one’s assent to (for instance) the Nicene Creed is certainly not to be judged by one’s possession of an abstract idea corresponding to the phrase (in the English version) “of one substance,” for then there would be no sincere professions at all. Yet surely the plain language distinction between genuine and feigned assent is tracking some difference.²⁰ Crito holds, quite plausibly, that in ‘common use’ and ‘the practice of mankind’ the distinction between genuine and feigned religious faith is a distinction between instances of verbal assent which are accompanied by certain practical attitudes and actions, and those that are not. The one who sincerely or genuinely assents to the doctrine of the Incarnation is the one who “submit[s] to [Christ’s] government, believe[s] his doctrine, and practise[s] his precepts” (Alc, §7.11), and the one who sincerely or genuinely assents to the doctrine of original sin is the one who has “a salutary sense of his own unworthiness, and the goodness of his Redeemer” (§7.13). These people are genuinely different from those who merely mouth the words, and this difference

20. With this should be compared Philonous’s observation that, quite independently of any metaphysical theory, there is an *empirical* or *experiential* distinction between dreaming and waking which is left perfectly intact after the rejection of material substrata (DHP, 235).

has empirical upshots which are available as a practical basis for the ascription of faith to them. It is, in short, a part of the public, conventional rules of language.

Crito now attempts to add to the case for “the efficacious necessary use of faith without ideas” by arguing that belief in a future state is efficacious in preventing people from carrying out ‘wicked projects,’ “although it be a mystery, although it be what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive” (Alc, §7.13). The empirical claim about motivation is, of course, open to question, but the fact that it is taken to be relevant is significant: Crito assumes that if talk about an afterlife produces this effect, then it must be admitted to be both meaningful and useful. This is Berkeley’s conclusion about religious discourse in general.

4.5 The Nature of Science (§§14-16)

At the end of Crito’s speech, Alciphron raises a new objection: “It seems, *Euphranor* and you would persuade me into an opinion . . . that a man need not renounce his reason to maintain his religion. But, if this were true, how comes it to pass, that, in proportion as men abound in knowledge, they dwindle in faith?” (§7.14). This objection leads to a discussion of the relationship between faith and knowledge. Euphranor claims that “The objections made to faith are by no means an effect of knowledge, but proceed rather from an ignorance of what knowledge is.” Since both faith and knowledge “imply an assent of the mind,” they must be understood together, and when they are so understood the freethinkers’ objections collapse.

Paradigmatic instances of knowledge are those involved in sciences (in the early modern sense of that word), such as arithmetic or geometry. Euphranor gives the following account of science:

To trace things from their original, it seems that the human mind, naturally furnished with the ideas of things particular and concrete, and being designed, not for the bare intuition of ideas, but for action or operation about them, and pursuing her own happiness therein, stands in need of certain general rules or theorems to direct her operations in this pursuit: the supplying which want is the true, original, reasonable end of studying the arts and sciences. Now these rules being general, it follows that they are not to be obtained by the mere consideration of the original ideas, or particular things, but by the means of marks or signs, which, being so far forth universal, become the immediate instruments and materials of science (Alc, §7.14).

A science, according to Euphranor, is a *linguistic* object. Generality can be had only “by the means of marks or signs,” and this generality is essential to science. The conventions which give these marks or signs their meaning are general rules by which we operate on ideas for the purpose of pursuing happiness. “It is not therefore by mere contemplation of particular things, and much less of their abstract general ideas, that the mind makes her progress, but by an apposite choice and skillful management of signs” (§7.14). In what, then, does the *knowledge* of a science consist? Euphranor tells us,

one, who can neither write nor read, in common use understands the meaning of numeral words, as well as the best philosopher or mathematician.

But here lies the difference: the one who understands the notation of numbers, by means therefore is able to express briefly and distinctly all the variety and degrees of number, and to perform with ease and dispatch several mathematical operations, by the help of general rules (§§7.14-15).

Scientific knowledge, in Euphranor's view, turns out to be a kind of know-*how*. It consists in practical competence with a certain sign system and certain rules for the practical application of that system. The mathematician knows more signs and is adept at more rules for manipulating them than is the non-mathematician. Euphranor remarks that it is evident both that these operations have a "use in human life" and also "that the performing them depends on the aptness of the notation."

At this point, Euphranor enters into a discussion of the development of arithmetic. He begins by claiming, quite explicitly, that arithmetic cannot be developed until after the introduction of language. This claim flies in the face of the Theory of Meanings by denying that mathematics can be represented in thought without the use of language. The introduction of words and symbols for numbers and operations on them is not merely putting into words a previously existing mental mathematics; it is in fact the first creation of mathematics.

Once language has been introduced, it is possible to introduce "the use of names, by the repetition whereof in a certain order [one] might express endless degrees of number." This, Euphranor says, "would be the first step towards" arithmetic. This, of course, repeats the previously discussed theory of the *Principles*, according to which the distinctive and essential element of a numeral system is the existence of a successor function by which signs for arbitrarily large numbers can be generated (see above, §3.3.1).

"The next step," Euphranor says, "would be, to devise proper marks of a permanent nature, and visible to the eye" (Alc, §7.15), or, in other words, a system of *writing*. This system "would, in proportion as it was apt and regular, facilitate the invention and application of general rules, to assist the mind in reasoning and judging, in extending, recording, and communicating its knowledge about numbers." Berkeley no doubt has in mind the advantages of computing in Arabic numerals rather than, for instance, Roman

numerals. The use of this notation allows for much simpler rules for performing the four basic arithmetic operations. In performing these operations, Euphranor says, “the mind is immediately occupied about the signs or notes, by mediation of which it is directed to act about things . . . without ever considering the simple, abstract, intellectual, general idea of number” (Alc, §7.15). Again, just as in the *Principles*, this is a process of “computing in signs” (PHK, §121).

In the science of arithmetic, Euphranor says, “the names [of numbers] are referred to things, the characters [i.e. numerals] to names, and both to operation” (Alc, §7.15). It is, in other words, the role that they play in computation that gives number words and numerals their meaning.

Arithmetic and algebra, Euphranor says, are sciences *par excellence*, and can therefore be used as a model to understand sciences, and the knowledge of them, in general. In particular, “all sciences, so far as they are universal and demonstrable by human reason, will be found conversant about signs as their immediate object, though these in the application are referred to things” (§7.16). In other words, the science itself is a system of signs manipulated according to its own internal rules, but what makes it a genuine *science*, and not merely a notation game, is that some of its theorems have practical applications.

4.6 Euphranor’s Summary and Conclusions (§§16-18)

At this point, Euphranor summarizes the theory which has been defended. He begins with a discussion of the importance of the use of signs to human knowledge. He says,

it is certain we imagine before we reflect, and we perceive by sense before we imagine: and of all our senses the sight is the most clear, distinct, various, agreeable, and comprehensive. Hence it is natural to assist the intellect by the imagination, the imagination by the sense, and the other sense by sight (Alc, §7.16).

This is done by the creation of signs apprehensible by the imagination for use by the intellect, of signs perceivable by the senses for use by the imagination, and so forth. This is the reason, for instance, for “the use of models and diagrams” in math and physics, as well as for the use of metaphors drawn from physical things to describe minds. Here Euphranor speaks of the use of signs to assist our thinking; as we saw in the detailed discussion of arithmetic, there are very important sorts of thinking which cannot be conducted without this sort of assistance. The conclusion is that “the doctrine of signs [is] a point of great importance, and general extent, which, if duly considered, would cast no small light upon things, and afford a just and genuine solution to many difficulties” (§7.16). This, of course, is the central thesis of this dissertation: Berkeley’s theory of signs, and specifically of language, is a “solution to many difficulties” in his philosophy.

Euphranor now provides a list of theses about signs which have been defended (§7.17). It will be helpful to comment on each of these theses individually.

Signs “do not always suggest ideas signified to the mind.” As we have seen, Euphranor has claimed both that some signs never suggest ideas, and that no sign becomes meaningful by *always* suggesting an idea; even those signs that frequently suggest ideas can be used meaningfully without speaker and hearer having the idea in question in mind.

“When [signs] suggest ideas, they are not general abstract ideas.” Signs, of course, cannot do this, for there are no general abstract ideas to be suggested.

Signs “have other uses besides barely standing for and exhibiting ideas, such as raising proper emotions, producing certain dispositions or habits of mind, and directing our actions in pursuit of that happiness, which is the ultimate end and design, the primary spring and motive, that sets rational agents at work.” The essential point here is that linguistic conventions do not refer only to ideas.²¹ The conventions governing the use of a sign may also require us to perform a certain action, be motivated in a certain way, or experience a certain feeling.

“Signs may imply or suggest the relations of things; which relations, habitudes or proportions, as they cannot be by us understood but by the help of signs, so being thereby expressed and confuted, they direct and enable us to act with regard to things.” This thesis, which Berkeley added to the list in the 1752 edition, had not been given much discussion in the earlier dialogue, and so it is not possible for us to know in any detail what Berkeley had in mind. However, it is quite clear that Euphranor is claiming that *relational thought in general* is possible only by means of signs. Again we can see, on this view, just how impoverished human thought would be without language.

“The true end of speech, reason, science, faith, assent, in all its different degrees, is not merely, or principally, or always the imparting or acquiring of ideas, but rather something of an active, operative nature, tending to a conceived good; which may sometimes be obtained, not only although the ideas marked are not offered to the mind, but even although there should be no possibility of offering or exhibiting

21. On the role of convention in Berkeley’s theory of language, see below, §5.3.

any such idea to the mind.” This possibility is illustrated by the example of “the algebraic mark, which denotes the root of a negative square.” This mark, Euphranor says, “has its use in logistic operations, although it be impossible to form an idea of any such quantity.” Euphranor’s point is quite general: “what is true of algebraic signs, is also true of words or language, modern algebra being in fact a more short, apposite, and artificial sort of language” (Alc, §7.17). It is, in other words, a widespread feature of language that it aims to shape actions and feelings, and it sometimes does so without the mediation of ideas. Note that this is the case not only for faith, but for “speech, reason, science, faith, assent, in all its different degrees.” Clearly, then, this is not a thesis to be confined to religious mysteries; it is a theory of language. The theory says that words (or, more generally, signs) get to be meaningful when they are associated with conventional rules which are useful for some purpose, and that to use them competently is to follow the rules. The case in which these rules allow direct substitution between words and ideas is a special case confined to a small portion of human language. This is hardly surprising, for the having of ideas is not an end in itself; having ideas is meant to contribute to larger projects and, ultimately to general human flourishing. Language is likewise a tool for these ends, and the linguistic rules require the having of ideas only in the narrow range of cases where this is necessary for language to accomplish its ends.

Finally, Euphranor summarizes his conclusions about science and of faith. It is not the aim of either of these “to obtain precise ideas,” and when people mistakenly adopt this end, “they will be sure to embarrass themselves with difficulties and disputes,” examples of which can be found in both science and religion. Our failure to obtain ideas of infinitesimals in no way renders geometry either useless or meaningless; rather, geometry “governs and directs the actions of men, so that by the aid or influence thereof

those operations become just and accurate, which would otherwise be faulty and uncertain” (Alc, §7.18). Since the fact that signs are useful and action-guiding is sufficient for their meaningfulness in geometry, it must likewise be sufficient elsewhere, including in religious mysteries.

At this point, Alciphron raises one final objection: “According to this doctrine, all points may be alike maintained. There will be nothing absurd in Popery, not even transubstantiation.” It is noteworthy that Crito strenuously objects to this allegation. The theory that has been presented does not have the consequence that there are no standards of correctness for religious mysteries. “This doctrine,” Crito insists, “justifies no article of faith which is not contained in Scripture, or which is repugnant to human reason, which implies a contradiction, or which leads to idolatry or wickedness of any kind.” This, unfortunately, does little to clarify the question of what the standards of correctness for articles of faith, or for assertions more generally, are in Berkeley’s theory. Euphranor and Crito had earlier defended the Bible’s claim to be regarded as a divine revelation; whatever the relevant standards are, God can be presumed to meet them. It is not clear what it would be for a doctrine to be ‘repugnant to human reason’ or ‘contain a contradiction’ besides for it to lead to puzzles of the sort that have earlier been dismissed as unimportant. The last criterion, at least, is rather clear: since part of the aim of these assertions is to generate good behavior, those that generate bad behavior are to be rejected. These questions about the standards for accepting or rejecting assertions will be addressed in chapter 7, below.

Alciphron does not challenge Crito’s defense. Instead, at this point he drops the argument against religious mysteries and proceeds along a different track. Since the discussion of language ends here, I will leave off my commentary and proceed to the philosophical explication and evaluation of Berkeley’s theory of language.

Chapter 5

Rule-Following

So far, I have defended two interpretive theses about the role of rules in Berkeley's philosophy of language. The first is the claim that a word's being significant or meaningful consists in the existence of certain conventional rules by means of which the word becomes practically useful within the speaker community. The second is that speakers and hearers need not be able to articulate the rules they follow. The aim of this chapter will be to gain a clearer understanding of the nature of these rules, what it means to follow them, and what it means for them to obtain as conventions in a particular community. I begin by discussing the question of how, according to Berkeley, it comes about that a particular agent follows a particular rule. By understanding Berkeley's answer to this question, we will understand what, according to Berkeley, is involved in following a rule, and how Berkeley might respond to Wittgensteinian skeptical worries about rule-following. From this discussion will emerge a substantive constraint on the sorts of rules it is possible for agents to follow, a constraint I will call 'Berkeley's Internalist Requirement,' by analogy to a certain form of internalism in epistemology. Berkeley's Internalist Requirement requires, in brief, that prior to acquiring the rule the agent be capable of recognizing the conditions for the rule's applicability. This seems a modest requirement, but, as I will argue in chapter 6, it is a key premise in a series of arguments establishing Berkeley's immaterialist ontology. After examining the process of rule acquisition and Berkeley's Internalist Requirement, we will have a sufficiently strong grasp of Berkeley's general understanding of rules and rule-following to explore

Berkeley's understanding of the rules of language. We will be particularly concerned to show that Berkeley holds the rules of language to be a matter of *public convention* and to understand the precise meaning of this doctrine. Finally, we will examine an especially important class of linguistic rules, the rules of inference.

5.1 Implicit and Explicit Rule-Following

“Two ways there are of learning a language,” Berkeley observes, “by rule or by practice” (PHK, §108 [1710 ed.]).¹ Those who learn a language ‘by practice,’ Berkeley writes, will often understand the language “without . . . being able to say by what rule a thing is so or so.” The one who learns ‘by practice’ is, however, at an advantage since “it is very possible to write improperly, through too strict an observance of general grammar-rules” (PHK, §108; cf. Wittgenstein [1958a] 2009, 116-117). This is because the rules actually followed by the native speakers, especially in informal contexts, are far more complicated and flexible than the rules the grammarians have written down. The successful language learner, even if she initially learned the language ‘by rule,’ eventually develops a ‘feel’ for the language which allows her to make appropriate exceptions to the rules she has learned. This does not mean that she is in a position to correct the grammarian; grammarians have a special expertise which goes beyond mere linguistic competence. Writing down the rules is, in other words, a more difficult task than following them.

This is the case with the extremely complicated rules of natural language, and indeed, more generally, with most conventions that grow up ‘organically’ rather than being formally instituted. There are, however, simpler cases, such as the formal notation of

1. This point is less explicit in the 1734 edition, but is still present. On a possible reason for the change see Stoneham 2013, 221.

arithmetic, in which the use of the signs is governed by rules which can be stated with full precision.

Let us distinguish between three different ways in which the actions of an agent may be related to a rule. First, the agent's action may conform to the rule merely accidentally, as when a child moves a chess piece at random, but the movement she makes happens to be permitted by the rules of chess. We will call this 'rule-compliance.' Second, the agent may have conscious awareness of the rule, and the explicit intention to follow it, like a novice chess player who must say to himself 'this is the bishop; it moves diagonally' before deciding what move to make. Call this 'explicit rule-following.' The final case is that of the experienced chess player who, looking at the board configuration, 'sees' only the legal moves and decides among them without ever (consciously) thinking about the rules of the game. Call this 'implicit rule-following.'

The fluent speaker of a language follows its rules implicitly. The point that Berkeley is making in the passage under discussion is that there are two very different ways in which it can come about that someone follows a rule implicitly: in some cases, the individual starts out by following the rule explicitly, and in other cases not. My task here will be to argue that what Berkeley calls 'suggestion' just is the implicit following of rules of a certain sort and to explain the different ways, according to Berkeley, this can come about.

Berkeley's clearest treatment of suggestion is to be found in the late (1733) work, *The Theory of Vision . . . Vindicated and Explained*. In this work, Berkeley is concerned to distinguish suggestion from inference, something he had not done clearly in earlier works (Winkler 2005a, 161n6). According to the theory put forth in the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, to say that 'blue' suggests blue and 'red' suggests red is to say that "upon hearing the words *blue* or *red*, [the appropriate colors will] be apprehended by

the imagination” (TVV, §10). Suggestion is the province of the senses, as contrasted with inference and judgment, which are the province of the understanding (§42). As a result, what is suggested by sensation may be said to be a mediate object of sensation, but what is inferred from sensation is not an object of sensation (TVV, §§11-12; cf. DHP, 174-175).

Two further facts about suggestion are emphasized in Berkeley’s earlier works: it is involuntary, and it happens so quickly as to go unnoticed. The transition from the suggesting idea to the suggested idea is “swift and sudden and unperceived” (NTV, §145), and “it is not in our power to keep out the [suggested idea], except we exclude the [suggesting idea] also” (§51).

Berkeley lists four ways in which one idea can come to suggest another, “by likeness, by necessary connexion, by geometrical inference, or by arbitrary institution” (TVV, §14; cf. TVV, §39). In *Alciphron*, a similar list is found, but with only three items: “necessary deduction to the judgment, . . . similitude to the fancy, . . . [or] experience, custom, and habit” (Alc, §4.10; cf. Rickless 2013, 46). The *Alciphron* passage can be taken as giving the same list as the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* if we take ‘necessary connexion’ and ‘geometrical inference’ to be two varieties of ‘necessary deduction to the judgment.’ I will discuss each of Berkeley’s three relations in turn, beginning with ‘necessary deduction to the judgment.’

TVV, §14 is embedded in a prolonged argument against the view that we mediate perceive by sight physical objects which are the efficient causes of our immediate visual perceptions. ‘Necessary connexion’ is standard early modern causal vocabulary. It is true that it is not always a causal term for Berkeley; for instance at §39, a passage which repeats the taxonomy with which we are concerned, Berkeley says that, between the immediate and mediate objects of vision, “there is no . . . relation of similitude or causality,

nor any necessary connexion whatsoever.” However, if these taxonomies really are to correspond to the relevant alternatives Berkeley attempts to rule out in [TVV](#), and if the two passages are to be seen as giving the same taxonomy, then ‘necessary connexion’ in §14 must correspond to ‘causality’ in §39, and the other possible kind of ‘necessary connexion’ in §39 must be the sort found in ‘geometrical inference.’ *Alciphron* lumps these together under the heading ‘necessary deduction to the judgment.’ To summarize: there is a broad use of ‘necessary connexion’ in which it stands for a genus of which causality and logical (‘geometric’) entailment are species, and this is the way it is used in §39. However, there is also a narrow use in which ‘necessary connexion’ is a synonym of ‘causality,’ and this is how it is used at §14.

In Berkeley’s view, it is strictly speaking impossible that there should be an efficient causal relation in the case at issue, since neither an idea, nor anything like an idea, can ever cause anything ([TVV](#), §11; cf. [PHK](#), §25). However, causality is ruled out only as a hypothesis about “how one idea comes to suggest another belonging to a different sense, how things visible suggest things tangible, [and] how present things suggest things remote and future” ([TVV](#), §14). This is because, in these cases, both of the relata are ideas. One can nevertheless legitimately infer that one’s ideas have a cause ([PHK](#), §26; [TVV](#), §§11-12). This cause Berkeley calls ‘God.’² The causal relation here establishes a connection between perceived ideas and God which can form the basis of a suggestion relation, whereby the ideas in question, in addition to suggesting other ideas, suggest to us the thought of God. As a result, once we have been sufficiently indoctrinated with Berkeley’s philosophy, we will indeed come “to *see* the sovereign Lord of all things” (albeit in a rather attenuated sense) when we look at the creation

2. Following Bennett 1971, §35, this has come to be known as Berkeley’s ‘Passivity Argument’ for the existence of God. For an analysis of the argument, with references to the relevant secondary literature, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §1.1.

(PHK, §148, emphasis added). Bringing about this vision of God is, indeed, central to the religious aim of Berkeley's philosophical writing.³

Although this seems to clash with Berkeley's insistence that "the Power or Cause of ideas is not an object of sense, but of reason" (TVV, §12), the conflict is merely apparent. Berkeley's point here is that God cannot at first come to be known by sense, in the way colors, shapes, and familiar objects can. Rather, it is only *after* God has been inferred, by reason, that the suggestion relation which makes God (again, in a rather attenuated sense) a mediate object of sensory perception can get off the ground. This is in line with Philonous's claim that Hylas can mediately perceive Julius Caesar by perceiving a painting or statue only if he has some prior knowledge of Caesar (DHP, 203-204).

The competing theory of vision Berkeley has in mind when he speaks of 'necessary connexion' (in the narrow sense) says that the mediate objects of vision are suggested by the immediate objects due to a causal connection between them. In speaking of 'geometrical inference,' on the other hand, Berkeley refers to the Cartesian theory which he had refuted at length in the *New Theory of Vision*.⁴ On this theory, it is mathematical computation rather than causal inference which takes us from the suggesting idea to the suggested idea. In our discussion of inference, below (§5.4), the difference between these two types of inference will become important. Here it suffices to say that in both

3. Berkeley is, of course, careful to distinguish this sort of vision *of* God from Malebranchean vision *in* God (PHK, §148; DHP, 213-215). The contrast is explicit in Alciphron's summary of the conclusion to which Euphranor has driven him by means of the divine language argument:

I was aware, indeed, of a certain metaphysical hypothesis, of our seeing all things in God by the union of the human soul with the intelligible substance of the Deity, which neither I, nor any one else could make sense of. But I never imagined it could be pretended, that we saw God with our fleshly eyes, as plain as we see any human person whatsoever, and that he daily speaks to our senses in a manifest and clear dialect (Alc, §4.14).

4. On the Cartesian targets of NTV, see Atherton 1990, Part 1.

of these cases the relation would have to be discovered by reason before suggestion can occur. In the remainder of this section, I will follow Alciphron in lumping these together and calling them cases of ‘deduction.’

We do not need to say very much about the second relation, similitude. As we have already discussed (§3.1), Berkeley holds that the mind has a primitive capacity to engage in acts of comparison, and by these acts it finds some ideas to be similar and others not.

The third and most important relation is the one Alciphron calls “experience, custom, and habit.” This relation is the most important since Berkeley classifies our knowledge of both human language and the language of nature under this heading.

In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, Berkeley calls this category ‘arbitrary institution’ (TVV, §14), and this may suggest that the connections between ideas in this category must be *instituted by someone*. This, however, cannot be Berkeley’s view, since Berkeley recognizes that the conventions of language are not traceable to explicit acts of stipulation or institution, and he takes the suggestion relations involved in language to fall under this heading. Thus it is incorrect to say, as Samuel Rickless does, that the association of ideas in this category traces to a ‘stipulation’ or ‘act of will’ (Rickless 2013, 46). This is sometimes the case: for instance, the connection between visual ideas and the tactile ideas they suggest is arbitrarily instituted by God (PHK, §§30, 36; DHP, 231), and this is no doubt the reason why Berkeley uses the term ‘arbitrary institution’ to refer to this category in TVV. However, Berkeley’s ultimate view is that, in this kind of case, “one idea is qualified to suggest another, merely by being often perceived with it” (TVV, §68; cf. NTV, §25; DHP, 204). It may or may not be the case that some agent intentionally brought it about that such ideas were often perceived together. In vision, this *is* the case: God intentionally associates visual ideas with tactile ones. However, this intention of God’s is not *directly* responsible for the suggestion relation. Rather,

God's intentional activity brings about the constant conjunction of the ideas, and the constant conjunction results in the suggestion relation obtaining.

There are, then, three phenomena which can lead to one idea suggesting another: deduction, similitude, and experience. The next question is how it comes about that, of two ideas related in one of these ways, one comes to suggest the other. Here Rickless holds that "The imagination is responsible for the mental act of *associating* the ideas that are [so] connected" and, once this has been done, the faculty of imagination sees to it that "the thought of P simply triggers the thought of Q, without the employment of actual ratiocination" (Rickless 2013, 47). In Rickless's view, P cannot suggest Q *to me* unless I have previously performed an act of association.

This interpretation is rendered quite implausible by Berkeley's use of words like 'habit' and 'custom' in connection with suggestion. One does not form a habit by deciding to, or by performing some special act, distinct from the act which is to become habitual. Rather, one forms a habit by performing a certain action repeatedly. This results in *that very same action* becoming habitual. As Euphranor says, speaking of both English and the language of vision, "there must be time and experience, *by repeated acts*, to acquire a habit of knowing the connexion between sign and things signified; that is to say, of understanding the language, whether of the eyes or of the ears" (Alc, §4.11, emphasis added). If I repeatedly pass from having idea P to having idea Q, I will form the habit of moving from P to Q. *Why* exactly I passed from P to Q in the initial cases is unimportant; however I did it, if I do it enough times I will form a habit. The stronger the habit, the more the process becomes (nearly) instantaneous and involuntary.

In the 'arbitrary institution' case, one develops the habit by *environmental conditioning*, and this contrasts with the likeness and deduction cases. Comparison and deduction are general purpose psychological mechanisms by which we tend to pass from one idea

to another, in our own private thinking. They are, for the most part, under voluntary control. But sensory perceptions are not subject to voluntary control (PHK, §29). Thus in sensory perception we often pass *involuntarily* from one idea to another.⁵ Since there are all sorts of regularities in the ideas which succeed one another in our sensory perception, we are conditioned to certain expectations – which is to say, we are conditioned to imagine the thing which is going to come next.

This interpretation is confirmed by the independent evidence which we have already seen in favor of the claim that just this type of conditioning plays a vital role in Berkeley's account of language learning (§3.2, above). Linguistic competence, for Berkeley, involves suggestion (NTV, §51; DHP, 174). It is due to our conditioning that words suggest to us the things they do.

We are now prepared to return to Berkeley's distinction between two ways of learning language. The person who learns language 'by practice' has the same sort of complex, external conditioning which forges the suggestion relations for children learning their first language. The person who learns the language 'by rule' has some explicit rules in mind, which she follows consciously and intentionally to produce the correct linguistic behavior. By doing this repeatedly, she will forge the same suggestion relations as the one who learns 'by practice,' and it is then that she has become fluent (cf. Roberts 2007, 155n112).⁶

What Berkeley calls 'suggestion' is habitual movement from thinking about one thing to thinking about another. These suggestion relations are instances of implicit rule-following: Berkeley's theory of vision is a theory about the rules by means of which

5. This important contrast between the 'arbitrary institution' case and the other two is also emphasized by Rickless 2013, 46.

6. This is, of course, simplified, since it is unlikely that anyone would ever become truly fluent in a natural language entirely 'by rule' (e.g. by reading dictionaries and grammar manuals) without any of the other sorts of conditioning.

we see distance.⁷ Berkeley says little about other forms of rule-following. His most extended discussion is the treatment of the word ‘reward’ in the *Manuscript Introduction* (again, see §3.2, above).⁸ On the basis of that discussion, we are justified in supposing that other sorts of rules can be treated analogously. Implicit rule-following is habitual action.

In order to engage in explicit rule-following, one must have explicit understanding of the rule. In order to have such understanding, one must have already acquired rules for the proper use of the symbolism in which the rule is formulated. Hence one must have learned the use of *some* signs (not necessarily amounting to all of what we would ordinarily call a language) ‘by practice’ before one can begin to learn others ‘by rule.’ Some implicit rule-following must thus be prior to any explicit rule-following.⁹

This completes my interpretation of Berkeley’s understanding of rule-following. The remainder of this section is devoted to addressing a Wittgensteinian philosophical worry: what distinguishes the rule which is being *followed* from the indefinitely many distinct rules which are *complied with* (Wittgenstein [1958b] 2009, 224-228, 260-263; 1953, §§1.143-155, 185-190)? That is, in Kripke’s terms, how do I know that I am adding and not quadding (Kripke 1982)? Even more radically, what fact about me, or the world, can possibly make it the case that I am adding and not quadding? If these questions cannot be answered, radical semantic indeterminacy will result (Quine 1957; 1960, §16). We

7. Berkeley uses the word ‘rule’ only in talking about his opponents’ theories (NTV, §40; TVV, §64), but it is clear that what he is trying to do is to replace these incorrect rules with the correct ones.

8. Berkeley’s discussion of moral rules in *Passive Obedience* and the early dialogues of *Alciphron* could perhaps be brought to bear here, but moral rules are very different in kind from the rules with which we are presently concerned, and in any event the nature of rule-following is not addressed in any detail in these texts.

9. This fact was widely remarked upon in 20th century work in the philosophy of logic and language. See, e.g., Quine (1935) 1976, 103-106; Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.84-87; Quine (1954) 1976, 115; Dummett (1973) 1978, 217.

must therefore proceed to ask, what is the best that can be said on Berkeley's behalf in response to this question?

In light of the various other parallels between Berkeley and Wittgenstein, perhaps the first point that bears emphasizing here is that Berkeley shows no evidence of having had the slightest inkling of this sort of problem. This is due to a difference of attitudes in metaphysics about which things may be taken as primitive and which must be 'reduced,' and a closely related difference in epistemology about which notions are intelligible in themselves and which must be explained. Berkeley, along with many other early modern philosophers, takes agents and their actions – including actions taken in obedience to rules – to be basic, both in the order of knowledge and in the order of being. Thus Berkeley would simply be untroubled by his inability to give an account of the sort whose absence is lamented by Wittgenstein and Quine.

Understanding this difference of background assumptions will help to clarify a number of issues. First, it will help us get clearer on exactly how far Berkeley anticipates 20th century philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Quine and where the resemblance ends. Second, it may suggest strategies whereby we ourselves can avoid the difficulties raised by Wittgenstein and Quine. Finally, the results of this discussion will allow us to understand in more detail exactly how the rules of language come to be instilled in the members of a community.

Let us begin by setting the problem out in its Quinean form. Quine famously frames the issue as one which arises in attempting to *translate* one language to another, or to determine which word in one language is used in the same manner (means the same) as a word in another. We are tempted to think that words which can be defined ostensively pose an easier case than others, but even here we are in trouble, for no possible pattern

of ostension can distinguish between rabbits, the property of rabbithood, rabbit-stages, and undetached rabbit parts (Quine 1957, 5-7; 1960, 51-52).

It gets worse. The reason we cannot distinguish these cases is that they share the same ‘stimulus meaning’ (Quine 1960, 32-33) – that is (to a first approximation), they are prompted by the same external stimuli. However, as Wittgenstein might point out, we cannot be sure, on the basis of finitely many cases, that any two words are even stimulus synonymous, for it is always possible that the rules being followed diverge in certain as yet unobserved cases. Wittgenstein worries that this will apply even in my own case: I may not know which rule I am following (Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.186-188; [1958b] 2009, 261-262).

Berkeley is not in a position simply to dismiss these worries out of hand. On the interpretation I have defended, Berkeley is (implicitly) committed to agreeing with Wittgenstein that I may not be able to articulate the particular rule I am following. Furthermore, he is committed to agreeing that, even if I am able to articulate the rule, I must do so in language, and hence a question arises about what rules I am following in interpreting the formula which states the rule (Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.189-190). As a result, the ability to state the rule we are following is no solution to the problem at issue.

Without committing to any particular interpretation of Wittgenstein or Quine, we can identify two distinct problems here, one epistemological, and one metaphysical. The epistemological problem is, how can anyone ever know what rule any agent is following? The metaphysical problem is, what makes it the case that a particular agent is following one rule rather than another?

Berkeley, clearly agrees with both Wittgenstein and Quine that any attempt to determine which rule I am following must involve more than simple introspection. As a result, the epistemological problem certainly does arise for him. *The New Theory of*

Vision is, after all, an *empirical* (not merely introspective) investigation of the rules we humans follow in interpreting visual stimuli. Berkeley's aim is to discover the rules according to which the proper and immediate objects of vision – visual shapes and colors – suggest the mediate objects – tangible ideas, and in particular tangible “distance, magnitude, and situation” (NTV, §1). He does so by identifying the various data available as inputs to the process (the proper objects of vision) and correlating them with the outputs (perceptions of tangible distance, magnitude, and situation), forming empirical hypotheses about the rules connecting the inputs to the outputs. Because we cannot immediately and infallibly grasp the rules in introspection, the hypotheses we form about the rules we are following suffer from a general problem effecting all of empirical science, namely, the underdetermination of theory by observation.

Berkeley's contemporaries were aware of this sort of difficulty. Underdetermination is, after all, precisely what made Newton's famous ‘rules of philosophizing’ necessary (Newton 1729, 2:202-205). Newton's rules are meant to be of use in determining which among the many empirically adequate hypotheses ought to be adopted.

In *De Motu*, dealing with mechanics, Berkeley's solution to problems of underdetermination appears to be pragmatic and conventional. In these cases, he is willing to allow *metaphysical* underdetermination: there is no fact of the matter about whether Newton or Torricelli is correct (DM, §67). However, when speaking of minds, we are engaged, not in mechanics, but in metaphysics, and hence we are dealing with genuine efficient causation, about which Berkeley certainly wants to be a realist. As a result, there ought to be some objective metaphysical facts in play here; the question is, what are these facts, and where do they come from?

According to Berkeley, the only intelligible notion of efficient causation is the intentional action of an agent (see below, §6.4). Only agents genuinely *make* things happen.

As a result, if any regularity is to obtain in a manner which is something other than mere coincidence, the explanation for the obtaining of this regularity must be located in some agent's will. In *Siris*, Berkeley responds to an objection to this view:

It must be owned, we are not conscious of the systole and diastole of the heart, or the motion of the diaphragm. It may not nevertheless be thence inferred that unknowing nature can act regularly, as well as ourselves. The true inference is that the self-thinking individual, or human person, is not the real author of those natural motions. And, in fact, no man blames himself if they are wrong, or values himself if they are right. The same may be said of the fingers of a musician, which some object to be moved by habit which understands not; *it being evident that what is done by rule must proceed from something that understands the rule*; therefore, if not from the musician himself, from some other active intelligence, the same perhaps which governs bees and spiders, and moves the limbs of those who walk in their sleep ([Siris](#), §257, emphasis added).¹⁰

Berkeley here clearly claims that genuine agency is required for genuine (i.e. non-accidental) regularity.¹¹ More specifically, he claims that such regularity can only be the result of an agent following a rule. Thus if there are movements of our bodies which we do not produce by our own agency, then they must be produced by some other agent.

The use of the word 'understands' here is troubling given Berkeley's recognition of the possibility of implicit rule-following, and the difficulty of discovering what rules we

10. The status of 'bees and spiders,' as well as other non-human animals, will be examined in §8.6.

11. This provides an answer to the objection, raised by Brook 1973, 27, that Berkeley's account of suggestion contradicts his claims about the passivity of ideas. The movement from one idea to another in suggestion is 'done by rule' hence it must be done *by* some mind; the suggesting idea does not simply (efficiently) cause the second idea to spring up.

are following. However, this is made significantly less troubling by the explicit definition of ‘understanding’ Berkeley provides a few pages earlier: “We know a thing when we understand it; and we understand it when we can interpret or tell what it signifies” (Siris, §253). This ‘interpretation’ is explicitly connected with *prediction*: “According to Socrates, you and the cook may judge of a dish on the table equally well, but while the dish is making, the cook can better foretell what will ensue from this or that manner of composing it” (§253), and for this reason the cook is said to ‘understand’ the rules of cooking: not because he can state those rules, but because he foresees what outcomes will follow according to them. In this case, the rules we are talking about are not the rules the cook himself follows, but the rules God follows whereby the cook’s actions have predictable outcomes (cf. §160). However, this is the same kind of understanding which, according to Berkeley, is required for non-accidental regularities. In order for a regularity to obtain non-accidentally, it must obtain as a result of the action of an agent who is able to see, in each circumstance, what the rule requires of her. It does not require the ability to state a rule.¹²

One of the central conclusions Berkeley draws from the claim that only rule-following can underlie genuine regularity is that the laws of nature can be nothing other than the rules followed by God (PHK, §§30, 36; DHP, 231; cf. Boyle [1686] 1991, 180-185). What this shows is that, for Berkeley, rule-following plays the same metaphysical role which in many other systems, both before and after this period, is played by the dispositions of (inanimate) objects, or by ‘governing’ laws of nature. It is a fundamental

12. Incidentally, Wittgenstein quite explicitly takes the notion of ‘understanding a rule’ in this way (Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.150-155).

metaphysical posit meant to explain the uniformity of nature, and hence the rationality of induction.¹³

This provides an answer, of sorts, to the metaphysical worry: in order to explain the rationality of induction, we must simply take it as given that there *is* a metaphysical fact of the matter, even if it is unknowable. If, however, we do not wish to join Berkeley in endorsing irreducible agent causation, we will have a rather more complicated story to tell. The laws of nature, whatever their origins, will presumably ground facts about the dispositions of agents in counterfactual scenarios, which will give us significantly more determinacy than we would otherwise have. However, Quine's argument works precisely by noting that no *physical* dispositions could possibly distinguish the differences of meaning in question, and so tell us which rule we are following. Some headway can be made by allowing (as Berkeley does) appeals to private mental states, but given Berkeley's extraordinarily sparse theory of mental contents this will surely not allow us to draw all of the fine distinctions Quine mentions. Here there is a genuine question about whether the different *formulas* actually specify different *rules*, since there is no possible circumstance in which they differ in their guidance. This, however, is a question about the *individuation of rules*, and *not* a question about whether there is a unique rule which the agent follows.

The epistemological worry is more difficult to defuse. Given finite data, how can we be justified in believing, of ourselves or others, that we follow one particular rule rather than another? As has already been indicated Berkeley sees this as a matter for empirical

13. Cf. Reid (1788) 2010, 38, 251. For discussion of Reid's view, see Pearce 2012, §3. For an argument of this sort in favor of 'governing' (anti-Humean) laws of nature, see Armstrong 1983, §4.5. It is important to note, and Armstrong is quite clear on this point, that the contemplated strategy will not work as a way of persuading an (imagined) inductive skeptic of the rationality of induction; rather, it assumes the rationality of induction as a datum to be explained, and argues that one theory (Armstrong's own 'governing' theory of laws) is preferable to another (the so-called 'Humean' theory of laws), since the former can explain this datum while the latter cannot.

inquiry; it cannot always be settled reliably by introspection. Empirical inquiry is a messy business, and our best theories are always prone to revision. However, if we are not to succumb to inductive skepticism, we must accept that we do sometimes have reasonable beliefs about future events, and this must be based on some rules we thought were followed in the past.

In any event, as will become clear in chapter 9, Berkeley's anti-skeptical project does not require that we have firm, explicit, precise knowledge of these sorts of rules. It suffices that we know them 'by practice' – that is, that we know *how* to follow them. By this means, we gain knowledge of the order of nature; that is, of the various ideas which we will get if we take various courses of action. Having explicit beliefs about what the rules are can be helpful here, but it can be helpful even if the beliefs are relatively tentative and imprecise. What is important is that there *are* rules, and we successfully follow them.

5.2 Berkeley's Internalist Requirement

The question of what an agent must know in order to follow a rule has, in recent times, been most carefully explored in connection with a special class of rules known as *epistemic principles*. As the matter is usually formulated, an epistemic principle is a universal generalization of the form:

for any subject *S* and proposition *p*, if condition *C* is satisfied, then *p* is justified for *S* (see Van Cleve 1979, 75).

Thus, for instance, Descartes is said to endorse the epistemic principle, "For all *P*, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that *P*, then I am certain that *P*" (66).

The debate between internalists and externalists in epistemology is a debate about the status of these principles. Internalists assert, and externalists deny, that the subject must have some sort of *access* to something about the principle in order to gain knowledge (justification, certainty, etc.) by means of it. There are many different internalist theses, which differ from one another along two basic dimensions: the *sort* of access the subject must have (for instance, actual knowledge, potential knowledge, introspective awareness, etc.), and to *what* the subject must have access. For each of these internalist theses, there is a corresponding thesis about rule-following. Rules, like epistemic principles, can be formulated as universal generalizations. Rules are generalizations which have, or purport to have, normative force. To follow a rule is to instantiate that generalization *because of* its actual or perceived normative force. Thus, for instance, it is a rule of chess that bishops move only diagonally. This generalization is normative, and an agent who is following (rather than merely complying with) the rules of chess refrains from moving bishops in any other fashion because of the normative force of this generalization.

For present purposes, we will be concerned with two specific internalist theses about rules:

Rule Internalism (RI) In order to follow a rule, the subject must first be capable of explicit knowledge of the rule.¹⁴

Condition Internalism (CI) In order to follow a rule, the subject must first be capable of recognizing the condition of the rule's applicability.¹⁵

14. This corresponds to internalism type 2bii in the taxonomy of Van Cleve 2003, 45-46.

15. This corresponds to Van Cleve's internalism type 1bii.

By ‘the condition of the rule’s applicability,’ I mean the situation in which the rule instructs the agent to do something. This is to be distinguished from the condition in which the rule is in force. The condition of the rule’s applicability depends on its content, while the condition in which it is in force depends on the sort of normative force the rule possesses. It is a rule of chess that whenever one checks the opponent’s king one must announce this fact. The rule is applicable whenever one checks the opponent’s king; it is in force whenever one is playing chess.¹⁶

Both (RI) and (CI) are theses about the *preconditions* for rule-following. They claim that one cannot genuinely follow (as opposed to merely comply with) a rule unless a certain condition is *first* satisfied. The question at issue is, what must be going on in the agent in order for the normative force of the generalization to play the right kind of explanatory role in the agent’s actions? Internalists of various stripes claim that, in order for this to happen, some aspect of the rule must have some kind of epistemic status for the agent.

This debate is important since, as I have been arguing, it is a consequence of Berkeley’s theory that the rules we follow can expand our possibilities for mental representation. In particular, all general thought requires rule-following (see above, §3.1). Since all rules must be general (must specify some repeatable condition and some repeatable action to perform when the condition occurs), one cannot think about rules unless one is already following some rules (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.84-87; Sellars 1954, 204-206). It is precisely for this reason that Berkeley *must* reject (RI): until one begins to follow *some* rules, one is not capable of so much as (explicitly) thinking about *any* rules. Thus it must be possible implicitly to regard a generalization as having normative force, in

16. In the terminology of Schroeder 2014, the condition of the rule’s applicability is the condition in which one is in the rule’s *scope*, while the condition in which the rule is in force is the condition in which one is in the rule’s *jurisdiction*.

such a way that its perceived normative force helps to explain one's actions, without even being capable of explicitly formulating that rule.

This is closely analogous to problems that plague certain varieties of epistemic internalism: in order to gain knowledge, one must follow some justification rule, but (according to these forms of internalism) one cannot follow a justification rule unless one already has some knowledge (Van Cleve 1979). Accordingly (RI) is to be rejected. I have already argued at some length that Berkeley does indeed reject it.

I will now argue that Berkeley *accepts* (CI), and identify his reasons for accepting it.¹⁷ This redeems the promissory note from §2.3, above, by showing that Berkeley has grounds for rejecting the causal theories of representation there discussed. (CI) generates substantive constraints on the kinds of rules we can follow, which in turn generate constraints on the possible range of linguistic and mental representation which, as I will show in §6.7, below, plays an important role in Berkeley's argument for the claim that Locke's talk of 'material substratum' is meaningless.

The truth of (CI) is a basic presupposition of Berkeley's argument in the *New Theory of Vision*. In the early sections of that work, Berkeley argues from the fact that we are unaware of the lines and angles involved in Cartesian geometric optics to the conclusion that we do not perceive distance by means of these lines and angles (NTV, §§9-13; cf. Alc, §4.8). The rules involved in Cartesian geometric optics tell one to form certain judgments of distance about the objects one sees depending on the angles the objects make to the eye. What Berkeley is arguing is that these cannot possibly be the rules we follow in forming judgments of distance by vision because we are capable of forming those judgments correctly regardless of whether we are capable of recognizing the conditions of the applicability of these rules. Berkeley does not dispute that we *comply with*

17. The analogous position in epistemology to Berkeley's rejection of (RI) and acceptance of (CI) is the position William Alston dubbed 'internalist externalism' (Alston 1988).

the Cartesian rules; indeed, he explicitly concedes that we do (NTV, §78; TVV, §§31-32, 37, 43). Berkeley's claim is, instead, that since we have no access to the conditions for the applicability of these rules, they cannot be the rules we follow.

Although (CI) is presupposed by Berkeley, it is not difficult to construct his (implicit) argument on its behalf, based on the account of suggestion developed in the previous section. Rule-following, for Berkeley, is a learned behavior. In order for it to be learned, one must have the conscious experience of passing from the condition of the rule to the commanded action on many occasions. But one cannot be conscious of this transition unless one is conscious of the condition. Hence the acquisition of the rule presupposes consciousness of the obtaining of the condition.

This line of argument does not tend to support (RI) for, as we have seen, there are any number of mechanisms by which one can pass from one idea to another without explicit awareness of a rule. Once an agent has done this enough times, she develops a habit of acting in a certain way. This habitual action can be a form of rule-following.

Now, according to the Wisconsin semanticists, the causal theorists discussed in §2.3, *some* of the rules we follow which make mental representation possible may be learned in this way. However, they cannot *all* be of this sort, for many of the rules represent to us conditions of which we have no independent grasp. That is, according to the Wisconsin semanticists, my perceptual representation of a white object in front of me consists in my being in a state of some type *S*. I cannot learn to follow the rule *token state-type S in the presence of white objects*, for I have no way of recognizing the presence of white objects which is independent of the correlation between the presence of white objects and my being in a state of type *S*. However, according to the Wisconsin semanticists, some sub-personal system within me follows that rule. Some rules may be learned by the individual organism but, according to the Wisconsin semanticists, the most basic

rules must be *evolved* by the species. As a result of such evolution, causal laws ensure the reliable correlation between the internal state of the organism and the state of its external environment. The internal state thereby comes to represent the environmental factor with which it is connected.

As we have seen, Berkeley agrees that an idea may suggest its (efficient) cause. However, we must remember how, for Berkeley, this is possible. An idea comes to suggest its cause only when we have repeatedly *inferred* the cause from the idea, something that is always necessarily a conscious process (NTV, §19). The rule can therefore be acquired only after one has the conceptual sophistication to perform causal inferences and some independent means of having thoughts about the cause. As a result, the possibility of ideas suggesting their causes, as it is understood by Berkeley, does not contradict (CI).

Since Berkeley holds that only agents can possibly follow rules, the type of causal representation involved in Wisconsin semantics is, on his view, impossible. However, first, Berkeley's views on this subject are now widely rejected, and we have not uncovered any independent argument for those views. As we will see in chapter 6, Berkeley does have an argument for his position, but it is not an *independent* argument: it relies on certain constraints on mental and linguistic representation which are derived from (CI). As a result, (CI) cannot be derived from Berkeley's rejection of causal activity by non-agents. Second, it seems that, even granting all of Berkeley's assumptions, causal representation of this sort could be saved from this objection by resorting to occasionalism and holding that God follows the rule of causing me to token *S* in the presence of white objects.

In defense of (CI) and against the Wisconsin semanticists, I suspect Berkeley would pose the following question: how is it that the causal correlations in question bring it

about that *I* represent, or have knowledge of, the causes of my ideas? That is, if it is not I who follow the rules, then how am I the one who is in the representational state?¹⁸ This amounts, in the end, to no more than pumping our internalist intuitions, but it must be acknowledged that, in the end, philosophy must often come down to the pumping of intuitions. Furthermore, the intuition does seem to have some force, even in our 21st century context, and whatever force it has supports only (CI) and not the self-defeating (RI). That I should be the one who ensures that I perform action *A* whenever circumstance *C* arises does seem to require that I recognize *C* and do *A* as a result of that recognition; it does not seem to require that I be able to state the rule *do A in C*. If mental or linguistic representation requires rule-following, then it seems that the one following the rules is the one doing the representing. If, then, I am to have mental or linguistic representations, I must follow certain rules, and I can follow these rules only if I have some independent grip on the conditions of their applicability. This is Berkeley's Internalist Requirement.

5.3 The Conventional Rules of Language

The rules of language are rules governing a particular, public, social practice in which we are all immersed. Berkeley's discussion in *Alciphron* VII aims to make sense of this "daily practice" (Alc, §7.8). Because language is *communal* in this way it is governed

18. William Lycan makes a similar point in a rather different context. According to Lycan, consciousness is constituted by the operation of an 'internal monitor' which has the function *for the thinker* of monitoring its internal states. On his view, it is (at least conceptually) possible that there could be sub-personal systems which are conscious. Thus whether *I* am conscious of a monitored state depends on whether the monitor is performing its monitoring function *for me*. If it is monitoring my internal states for one of my sub-personal systems (or, in a more fanciful example given by Lycan, monitoring my internal states for CNN), then it will not follow that *I* am conscious of those internal states (Lycan 1995, 5-6). What I am suggesting, on Berkeley's behalf, is that in the same way a state functions as a sign *for me* only if *I* follow some rule for its use, and this requires that *I* am aware of the condition for its application. It is not sufficient that one of my sub-personal systems (if I have such systems), or God, should do so.

by certain norms. That is, despite the fact that the rules of language are in one sense radically arbitrary (DHP, 247), it is nevertheless possible to follow the wrong rule (PHK, §108). “Common custom is the standard of propriety in language” (DHP, 216).¹⁹ If language is to achieve its ends, the members of the speaker community must follow (at least roughly) the same rules. Furthermore, we must be aware that this state of affairs obtains; that is, we must follow the relevant rules with the expectation that others will likewise follow them.

David Lewis helpfully compares the kind of coordination needed here to the decision of which side of the street to drive on (D. Lewis 1969, 6, 40-41, 44-45, 58-59, 65-66; 1975, 6). Neither side of the street is intrinsically more eligible to be driven on; the decision is radically arbitrary. However, if I am to be able to travel quickly and safely to my destination, I must follow the rule of driving on a particular side and confidently expect others to follow the same rule, and my expectation must be satisfied.

That coordination of this sort is essential to language was already recognized before Berkeley (Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 58-63; EHU, §§3.2.4, 3.9.4, 3.9.8). For the proponents of the Theory of Meanings, the coordination involved was simply that the speaking of the word should bring it about that the hearer has the same mental content as the speaker. For Berkeley, the rules and aims are more complicated, but the basic point still stands. If, for instance, I am to use ‘reward’-talk to motivate you to perform a certain action, I must presuppose that you have internalized certain rules for the use of the word ‘reward’. From the fact that language seems to work, we can infer that we do indeed presuppose something of this sort, and that this presupposition generally leads to correct behavioral expectations. We must here answer three questions: (1) How are these behavioral patterns reliably brought about in speaker communities? (2) What kind

19. Hylas is the speaker here, but this is a concession he makes at Philonous’s prompting.

of knowledge, belief, or presupposition about the rules followed by others is required? and, (3) How do we gain this knowledge, belief, or presupposition?

The first question has already been answered. Rules of this sort are acquired by environmental conditioning. An individual who lives in a society where the conventions obtain is likely to receive such conditioning, in precisely the way Berkeley describes in his account of the acquisition of ‘reward’-talk (see above, §3.2).

The second and third questions pose greater difficulties. We have already seen that the rules of language cannot presuppose the ability to articulate rules, and that, for Berkeley, one who is incapable of articulating the rules is incapable of thinking about them. Furthermore, we have seen that there is some cause for pessimism about our ability to know exactly which rules are followed. This is a matter for empirical investigation, and hypotheses regarding it are always to be regarded as rather provisional. It simply is not the case that every language user knows (explicitly) which conventions obtain in her society.²⁰

I have been saying that some sort of knowledge, belief, or presupposition is required. Although Berkeley never addresses this question explicitly, what he needs to say, if his theory is to work, is that presupposition is the correct option. The particular kind of presupposition which will fit most neatly into Berkeley’s theory is what we might call *practical reliance*. When we plan our actions, we make a variety of, often implicit, and often complicated, assumptions about the behavior of others. That is, I have beliefs of the form ‘if I do *this*, she will do *that*,’ which need not be backed by an explicit belief that the other is following a specific articulable rule (though, of course, it *may* be backed by such a belief). This expectation can amount to another form of suggestion:

20. Lewis places quite strong knowledge requirements on parties to conventions. A variety of problems stemming from these requirements are pointed out by Burge 1975. However, even Lewis recognizes that the knowledge in question will not, in general, be explicit (D. Lewis 1975, 24-25).

the thought of the other in a given situation suggests to me the thought of her acting a particular way. Since these are suggestion relations, they can arise from environmental conditioning, just like the other suggestion relations involved in language acquisition.

Simple conventions like which side of the road to drive on are usually accompanied by an explicit (dispositional) belief that the convention obtains. However, complex conventions, like the syntactic rules of English, or the rules of polite dinner party conduct, are often followed by people who are not capable of articulating them: one learns the convention, as Berkeley says, *by practice*. Part of what one learns is to rely on others (mostly) following (approximately) the same rules as oneself.

5.4 Inference Rules

In both *De Motu* and *Alciphron*, Berkeley repeatedly emphasizes that certain words (and other signs) are meaningful because certain inferences can be drawn from them. The paradigm case is the use of ‘force’ in Newtonian mechanics. A wide variety of other cases, including the instances of religious language with which Berkeley is concerned in *Alciphron*, are also explicated in this way. The rules of inference must therefore be regarded as among the most important rules in Berkeley’s philosophy of language.

My aim in this section will be to examine Berkeley’s view of the rules of inference and the relation of this view to his general theory of language. I will be especially concerned with inferences involving operative language, since these have often been found problematic.

Let us begin by considering the sorts of inferences which are, on Berkeley’s view, permitted by the rules governing general ideas and general terms. When one reasons with general ideas, one is using particular, maximally determinate ideas as signs to represent classes of resembling ideas. One does this by following conventional rules. By

following these rules in, for instance, constructing geometrical demonstrations about triangles, one “may consider a figure merely as triangular, without attending to the particular qualities of the angles or relations of the sides” (PHK, Intro §16 [1734 ed.]); this is the sort of abstraction Berkeley allows. What this amounts to, however, is simply that “neither the right angle [of the particular triangle I consider], nor the equality, nor determinate length of the sides, are at all concerned in the demonstration” (Intro §16).

I argued above (§3.1) that Berkeley must accept in humans a primitive capacity not only to recognize resemblance and difference between ideas, but to distinguish between different respects of resemblance and difference. This is precisely what is involved in this sort of reasoning with the general idea of triangle. The rules for the use of the sign tell us in what respects other objects must resemble this idea in order to count as members of the signified class. It is in these respects that ‘agreement’ must be found if something is to be predicated of triangles universally. Thus, for instance, the rules require that every triangle be a two-dimensional figure; this is one of the required respects of resemblance. Suppose one uses some non-triangular particular idea (say, a particular square) to be, by signification, the general idea of a two-dimensional figure. One can recognize the agreement between these two general ideas by noticing that, in determining whether *this particular triangle* was a two-dimensional figure, one used only the respects of resemblance shared by all triangles.

Now let us consider the word ‘triangle.’ The rule for the use of the word ‘triangle’ permits its application to any “plane surface comprehended by three right lines” (Intro §18). In the simple case of drawing the immediate conclusion ‘*this* is a triangle,’ one simply applies the rule, which is, of course, consistent with being unable to state it. One also, however, knows how to use the phrase ‘two-dimensional figure,’ and can follow the rule for *that* phrase to conclude (ostending the same object) ‘*this* is a two-dimensional

figure.’ From these two sentences, using only the rules for general terms, one may conclude, ‘the triangle is a two-dimensional figure’ (where ‘the triangle’ refers to the particular triangle one earlier ostended).

One may wish to universalize and come to the conclusion, ‘every triangle is a two-dimensional figure.’ One could presumably do this by induction on particular instances, but in fact our certainty that all triangles are two-dimensional figures is much greater than the level of confidence such induction could (justifiably) produce. An actual (deductive) demonstration of this proposition may work in either of two ways. First, it may work in essentially the same fashion as the parallel inference involving general ideas, discussed above. That is, one may attend to the process of identifying something as a triangle, and notice that nothing could, by this process, be identified as a triangle unless that thing were a two-dimensional figure. This, however, involves meta-linguistic awareness of the rules of a sort that has been determined to be problematic, at least if what we are after is certainty (and surely we are certain that every triangle is a two-dimensional figure if we are certain of anything at all).

There is a better account available. According to this account, the rule for the application of ‘triangle’ to perceived objects is only one of the conventional rules associated with that word. Other rules connect it directly to other words, including the phrase ‘two-dimensional figure.’ There are, then, at least three distinct rules:²¹ a rule specifying that all and only objects of a certain sort may be described as ‘triangles,’ a rule specifying that all and only objects of a certain sort may be described as ‘two-dimensional figures,’

21. In fact, there will be a great many more, as many as the conceptual connections between distinct words. I do not think this is a problem. First, as I will argue in chapter 7, Berkeley subscribes to a radical holism about meaning, so he should not hold that we learn words one at a time by learning, all at once, the full set of rules associated with them. Second, I have argued that explicit awareness of the rules is not required. Third, this approach does not place any higher demand on our cognitive capacities than does the alternative. Even if these connections were empirical beliefs, we would still be committed to the view that we have an enormous number of (dispositional) beliefs about conceptual connections.

and a rule specifying that everything described as a ‘triangle’ may be described as a ‘two-dimensional figure’. These rules together make the word ‘triangle’ meaningful.

This account moves any skeptical worries we might have back up to the meta-linguistic level where they belong: we have no doubt that all triangles are two-dimensional figures, for we are following a rule authorizing precisely this assertion (a rule, that is, providing that any triangle, or group of triangles, including the group of all triangles, may be described as ‘two-dimensional figures’).

That Berkeley does in fact have rules of this sort in mind is confirmed by the analogy he draws between natural language and arithmetic and algebra (Alc, §7.8). In the discussion of arithmetic in the *Principles*, Berkeley refers vaguely to “methods of finding from the given figures or marks of the parts, what figures and how placed, are proper to denote the whole or vice versa” which it is possible to ‘contrive’ once one has a numeral system. He describes the process of following these rules as “computing in signs” (PHK, §121). Similarly, in *Alciphron*, Euphranor says that in bookkeeping, money is considered only at the beginning and end of a given ‘operation;’ in between, one works directly with the symbols (Alc, §7.8). The same is true with natural language inference: in the usual case, one simply manipulates the words according to rules which connect one word or string of words to another.

The rules of algebra permit one to simplify expressions by (e.g.) substituting ‘12’ for ‘7 + 5’. Each of these expressions has rules connecting it to the world in certain ways, like the separate rules for recognizing triangles and two-dimensional figures: one can recognize groups of 12, 7, or 5 objects, and can combine a group of 7 objects with a group of 5 objects to make one larger group. The rules tell us that this larger group will be a group of 12 objects, for the rules say that ‘12’ is substitutable for ‘7 + 5’. There is,

thus, a strong analogy between the rules for simplifying expressions in algebra and the rules of inference involving general terms in plain language.

Recognizing these sorts of special rules that directly authorize the substitution of words without explicit consideration of the relationship between the different rules governing the two words thus preserves our certainty about the correctness of our applications in particular cases and also preserves the parallel Berkeley sees between natural language and arithmetic and algebra. As indicated above, however, a skeptical worry at the meta-linguistic level remains: we may worry that there could be a situation in which our linguistic conventions give contradictory instructions. By way of illustration, imagine that we had a rule specifying that whatever is described as a ‘plant’ may be described as a ‘rock.’ Then, for any given plant, our rules would tell us that it was both permissible to call it ‘rock’ (since it is called ‘plant’) and impermissible to call it ‘rock’ (since it fails the resemblance tests for rock-hood). In natural language, *this does indeed happen*, and we either live with the situation (if the incoherence is not too glaring), or revise our conventions (see below, §7.2). An issue of this general sort is behind Locke’s famous query, “Whether a *Bat* be a *Bird* or no” (EHU, §3.11.7): our conventions may be indeterminate, may not cover every case, or may in some cases even conflict with one another.

Although such imperfect conventions serve us fine for practical purposes, in the sciences we must eliminate such difficulties, as far as possible, by introducing stipulative definitions (EHU, §3.11.12; cf. Arnauld and Nicole [1662] 1996, 60-63). Unlike ordinary language, the use of stipulative definitions in scientific language *does* involve explicit, meta-linguistic beliefs: one learns the formal, scientific vocabulary ‘by rule,’ and this makes one, justifiably, more confident that it has the formal properties one desires, such as giving a consistent and unambiguous verdict on the applicability of the word

to every conceivable case. Of course, since the definitions are stipulated in ordinary language, one can still imagine that there will be some hitherto unnoticed contradiction, but this is not an unrealistic radical skeptical hypothesis; the search for unnoticed contradictions or other problems in formal systems is part of mathematical and scientific practice (cf. Bacon [1620] 2000, §1.59).

In addition to the general term rules, which parallel the rules for simplifying expressions in algebra, there is another class of inference rules, those having to do with quantifiers and logical connectives. These sorts of *structural* or *syntactic* rules may be compared with the inference rules related to '=' in algebra. These rules permit us to operate on the sentence as a whole. For instance, the rules governing '=' tell us that we may choose any arithmetic operation whatsoever and perform it on both of the expressions joined by '=' to produce another correct (assertable) equation. They also tell us that we may substitute the expression on one side for the expression on the other. Analogous rules can be seen as governing the logical vocabulary, rules of the sort one can find in any introductory logic text.

All of these inferences proceed by conventional rules: we adopt the convention of using a certain sign system and manipulating it in a certain way. Furthermore, they are arbitrary in the sense that there are indefinitely many equally eligible sign systems. However, it does not follow that there are no reasons favoring one system over another for, as Berkeley emphasizes, a sign system is a bit of *technology* which is useful to us for getting around in the world. Some systems are superior to others, as Arabic numerals are superior to tally marks (PHK, §121). Other systems are downright useless. In this way, all sign systems – and hence for Berkeley all *sciences*, including those we customarily regard as *a priori*, since all sciences are sign systems (Alc, §7.16) – must answer to the 'tribunal of experience' (cf. Quine 1951, 38). If we adopt bad conventions, which allow

us to derive such sentences as ‘ $0 = 1$ ’ (while keeping enough of our actual rules the same) our sign system will become useless, for it will ultimately tell us that anything may be substituted for anything else, and will make empirical predictions which will not be satisfied. Thus we may, in designing a sign system, adopt the convention of asserting just anything, but a bad convention of this sort, one that does not help us navigate the world of experience, may lead to the collapse of the system.

The collapse may not be radical. There is no reason why we should not be able to modify the system as needed to render it more useful. Depending on the nature of the system and the nature of its failing, this may involve a tacit adjustment by the native speakers of a language through natural language change, or it may involve an explicit stipulation. If an explicit stipulation is used, it may create a special scientific dialect of the sign system, or it may, through wider adoption, alter the language itself. Natural languages may well survive with ill-defined rules for inferences involving the logical vocabulary just as they survive with ill-defined rules for general terms. In actual fact, the English connectives ‘or’ and ‘if’ are arguably ambiguous, the former between inclusive and exclusive interpretations, the latter between the various different conditionals identified by philosophers.²²

We are now in a position to give at least the beginning of a Berkeleian response to Geach’s objection to expressivism (introduced above, §3.2). Geach famously complained that ‘anti-descriptive’ theories of the meaning of moral terms could not explain the validity of the following inference:

If doing a thing is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Tormenting the cat is bad.

Ergo, getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad (Geach 1965, 463).

22. These issues will be discussed in greater depth in §7.2.4, below.

The theories to which Geach is objecting hold that such sentences as ‘tormenting the cat is bad’ do not *assert* anything, or *predicate* some property, *badness*, of the action *tormenting the cat*, but rather *condemn* that action, and hence such sentences do not express propositions. Geach’s objection is that ‘bad’ can be used in complex sentences such as the first premise of the argument. Uttering this sentence does not appear to be an act of condemnation. Yet ‘bad’ must be used in the same sense here as in the rest of the argument, or the argument would be invalid.

I have been arguing that, on Berkeley’s theory, the rules for inferences of this sort should be understood as rules for ‘computing in signs,’ just like the rules of algebra. The ‘operative’ rules which attach to ‘bad’ do not prevent it from functioning within the sign system as a perfectly ordinary adjective. The difference between ‘bad’ and ‘red’ resides in how the words are ‘cashed out’ at the end of the ‘game.’ In other words, one reasons with operative terms in *exactly* the way one reasons with terms that denote sensory qualities; the difference between them is a difference in what it means to assent to the conclusion. If one concludes that the desk is black, one thereby comes to expect to have a black sensory experience when looking at the desk. If one concludes that getting one’s little brother to torment the cat is bad, one adopts some sort of negative affective or volitional attitude or stance to that action.²³ None of this changes the essential nature of reasoning which is, for Berkeley, simply a matter of manipulating symbols according to rules.

This also allows for a unified account of complex sentences: complex sentences are simply ‘inference tickets,’ taking their meanings from the inference rules to which their logical connectives attach them. These rules authorize one, under certain circumstances,

23. The details of Berkeley’s meta-ethics are far from clear; see §3.2, above.

to assert or deny the simple sentences from which the complex sentence in question is constructed, as well as various other sentences.

Is it the case, on this theory, that sentences such as ‘all triangles are two-dimensional figures’ and ‘if Jose is either a Republican or a Democrat, and he’s not a Republican, then he’s a Democrat’ are *true by convention*? I have argued so far that our linguistic conventions commit us to the assertability of such sentences, and that if it were found to be practically infeasible to go on permitting the assertion of such sentences, this would call for an alteration in our language. Furthermore, I have argued that it is central to Berkeley’s view that words get to be meaningful in virtue of these sorts of rules of use. Finally, the necessary materials for responding to Quine’s famous argument against the view that the logical truths are true by convention have been provided above, for Quine himself acknowledges that if we could explain “wherein an adoption of conventions, antecedently to their formulation, consists” then the theory of truth by convention would be tenable (Quine [1935] 1976, 105; cf. Quine [1954] 1976, 115), and this we have done (though only by rejecting some of Quine’s fundamental assumptions).

Nevertheless, we are not, at this point, in a position to assert that these sentences are, for Berkeley, true by convention. This is because all we have said so far is that our conventions authorize us to assert them. We have not yet discovered a Berkeleian account of the nature of truth or its relation to the permissibility of assertion. If we were to identify truth with assertibility, we would bring Berkeley quite close to Carnap: since assertibility is relative to a particular sign system, and sign systems are conventions which we adopt or reject on pragmatic grounds, truth would, on this proposal, inherit these features. A Berkeleian sign system would turn out to be a Carnapian linguistic framework, and metaphysical questions would turn out to be purely verbal (see Carnap 1950, and also §7.2.3, below).

It is, however, possible to resist this move, for it is not obvious, either as a matter of Berkeley interpretation or as a matter of fact, that to adopt a convention whereby a certain sentence is assertible is to adopt a convention whereby that sentence is *true*. It is not obviously impossible to adopt a convention permitting the assertion of falsehoods in sufficiently rare cases. This could be done either by accident or on purpose. For a possible example of the intentional case, consider a conventional rule which permitted us to assert falsehoods if, but only if, doing so would save one or more innocent human lives (and would not endanger any other innocent lives).²⁴ It seems that cases of this sort are sufficiently rare that the ends of language would not be undermined if we followed this rule and (tacitly) expected others to follow it. For a possible example of the accidental case, consider terms purporting to denote the theoretical entities of a false scientific theory. It may well be that the linguistic conventions which governed the use of ‘phlogiston’ authorized the assertion of ‘combustion involves the release of phlogiston;’ nevertheless, that sentence was false all along, even before the community rejected ‘phlogiston’ discourse.

The rules of inference we have so far discussed are part of our linguistic conventions, and are partly constitutive of the meanings of the words involved. These rules authorize certain assertions. However, the question of whether such authorization guarantees that the assertions will be *true* must await a more general inquiry into the nature of truth, which will be the topic of §7.2.

In closing this chapter, I wish to consider two inference patterns which play a central role in Berkeley’s metaphysics, but which resist the sort of treatment we have given in the cases discussed so far. The first of these is the inference from a change to an efficient cause of that change. The second is the inference from the existence of an idea to the

24. Rules of this sort are much discussed in the literature on Kantian ethics. See, e.g., Korsgaard 1986, 328-330.

existence of a mind that perceives that idea. The first type of inference is needed to secure the existence of God (PHK, §26); the second type of inference is needed to secure the mind-dependence of bodies (§4) and the existence of other finite minds (see Pearce 2008, and §8.6, below).

If these two patterns of inference are authorized by the actual rules of language, no special problems are raised for Berkeley's first-order project. It is certainly true that in Berkeley's intellectual context causal inference was one of the recognized means of justifying assertions. Berkeley can therefore use this kind of inference in justifying his assertions to his contemporaries. But consider: 'spirit,' 'cause,' and 'God' are not connected to ideas in the way words like 'red' are. They appear to be theoretical terms connected indirectly (if at all) with experience, much like 'force' and, of course, Berkeley does explicitly compare theological discourse to talk about 'force' in *Alciphron*. However, it is Berkeley's view that "'Force', 'gravity', 'attraction' and similar terms are useful for reasoning, and for calculations about motion and moving bodies, but not for understanding the simple nature of motion itself or for designating so many qualities" (DM, §17). Berkeley would certainly not say the same thing about 'spirit,' 'cause,' or 'God.' The point of Berkeley's demarcation between physics and metaphysics (see above, §3.3.3) was supposed to be to have a realist understanding of metaphysical discourse and an anti-realist understanding of physical discourse. Physics, in Berkeley's view, involves the adoption of conventional rules for the manipulation of symbols in order to make useful predictions. Berkeley's metaphysical claims are meant to make contact with reality in a deeper way than this, but it is far from clear how, within Berkeley's philosophy of language, this is possible.

Despite Berkeley's emphasis in *Alciphron* on the similarities between the discourses of theology and physics, it is clear from *De Motu* that he intended to draw a sharp distinction between them. The nouns used in metaphysics and theology pick out objectively existing entities, and true assertions in these areas attribute to those entities features they really, objectively have. The nouns in physics, on the other hand, are merely placeholders in a conventional notational scheme, waiting to be 'redeemed,' directly or indirectly, for ideas. It is to the examination of this distinction that we now turn.

Chapter 6

Reference and Ontology

Central to the project of *De Motu* is a distinction between what we may call ‘genuine referring expressions’ and ‘quasi-referring expressions.’ Genuine referring expressions, like ‘red,’ are used to label objects which exist and have their natures independently of the sign system. Quasi-referring expressions are *syntactically* just like genuine referring expressions, but differ *semantically* in that they do not label objects in the way genuine referring expressions do.¹ Thus Berkeley says quite explicitly that “‘Force’ ... is used ... *as if* it signified a quality” (DM, §5, emphasis added).² Quasi-referring expressions can be meaningful and can be used to express truths despite the fact that they are not used to label anything (see Alc, §7.10). Quasi-referring expressions are not nonsense, and it is not the introduction or use of quasi-referring expressions which, according to Berkeley, is the cause of philosophical error. Errors stem, instead, from confusion between genuine referring expressions and quasi-referring expressions (DM, §6).

Berkeley need not (and, in my view, should not) object to such English sentences as “Gravitational attraction is one of the things referred to by ‘force.’” Instead, he can merely say that the plain English verb ‘to refer’ is ambiguous and, when doing philosophy, it is important that we distinguish between its two senses, i.e. between what

1. A similar distinction has more recently been defended by Hofweber 2009.

2. In the original Latin, ‘as if’ is in fact not ‘quasi’ but ‘tamquam.’ I will refrain from introducing the atrocious barbarism ‘tamquam-referring expression.’

I am calling ‘genuine reference’ and ‘quasi-reference.’³ As a result, I will make no attempt to avoid using such locutions as ‘talk about forces;’ locutions such as this one make perfectly good sense, on Berkeley’s view as I understand it, but one must realize that such talk is not *about* anything in the way talk about red is about something. Insofar as forces can be said to exist at all, they exist as an artifact of our scientific theories. Red things, on the other hand, exist quite independently of any sign system we adopt.

Berkeley thus divides terms which are syntactically like referring expressions into three categories: some are genuine referring expressions, others are quasi-referring expressions, and others are nonsense. This distinction forms the heart of Berkeley’s meta-ontology: one incurs an ‘ontological commitment’ when, and only when, one attempts to use a word or phrase as a genuine referring expression. The aim of this chapter is to understand Berkeley’s meta-ontology and the way in which his first-order ontology follows from it. Along the way, we will have occasion to address a number of controversial issues in Berkeley’s ontology, including the nature of bodies (§6.3) and spirits (§6.5). Making use of resources from our study of Berkeley’s philosophy of language, I will explicate Berkeley’s theory of spiritual substance, and defend a novel interpretation of Berkeley’s account of bodies, according to which bodies, like forces, are mere quasi-entities which ‘exist’ as a result of the way we use language to structure our sense experience. This raises a question about what Berkeley means in claiming to defend the ‘reality’ of bodies. This and some related questions about ontological vocabulary will be discussed in §6.6. Finally, in §6.7, I will defend Berkeley’s claim that it follows from his philosophy of language that ‘matter,’ ‘material substratum,’ and other related terms are nonsense.

3. Berkeley explicitly endorses this kind of move with respect to words like ‘cause’ and ‘force’ (Siris, §§154-155, 220).

6.1 Sensible Qualities

The simplest terms to understand in Berkeley's philosophy of language are those, like 'red,' which denote sensible qualities. Here Berkeley's metaphysics and epistemology create no difficulties for the application of his philosophy of language: the theory of general terms works precisely as envisioned (see above, §3.1).

The reason for such straightforward application is that sensible qualities are immediately and unproblematically 'present to the mind.' In our earlier discussion of general terms, we spoke rather liberally of words being *applied* to objects, of objects being *called* by various names, and of *recognizing* objects as falling under concepts. What happens when we are trained in the use of a word like 'red' is that we acquire the (implicit) rule: '*red*' may be applied to red things.

More properly, and more informatively, in order to comply with Berkeley's Internalist Requirement (above, §5.2), the rule for 'red' should be given by reference to an exemplar or exemplars, rather than by use of the word 'red.' Of course, in the ordinary case, the rule is not explicitly given at all. What we are concerned with here is the most perspicuous way of stating the rule which the subject follows implicitly. Since the subject learned the rule by means of exemplars, the rule is, in essence, *ostensive*: it is a rule that says that things are to be labeled 'red' because they resemble *those* things. Since the rule is followed implicitly, there is no need to have an occurrent thought of any exemplar every time one follows it. However, the exemplars *are* required for the learning of the rule. Before one can learn the rule, one must be able to recognize things that resemble the exemplars, and this requires having the exemplars 'before the mind.'

On the other hand, once one has acquired the rule, one simply labels objects ‘red’ automatically, without the need for any ‘mental machinery’ at all.⁴ It is the ability to follow this rule, engaging in acts of *labeling* things ‘red’ that secures the status of ‘red’ as a genuine referring term.

In light of the broadly Wittgensteinian approach to language which I have been attributing to Berkeley, this account of the use of ‘red’ faces three difficulties. The first difficulty has to do with the sort of ostension involved in the rule. The second has to do with what constitutes an act of labeling. The third and final difficulty has to do with how words can be used to label private sense experiences if words are part of a phenomenon (language) which is essentially public in nature.

I said that the rule the agent follows in using the word ‘red’ relies essentially on certain exemplars which played a role in the agent’s learning of the rule. However, as Wittgenstein points out, unless one has some prior sense of what *sort* of word is being defined – for instance, whether a color word, a number word, or a proper name of an object – the introduction of exemplars will not be sufficient for learning the proper use of the word (Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.29-30). Wittgenstein makes this point in the course of criticizing the idea “that learning language consists in giving names to objects. Viz, to human beings, to shapes, to colours, to pains, to moods, to numbers, etc.” where this “naming is something like attaching a label to a thing” (§1.26). The point Wittgenstein is making is not that naming or labeling is not a genuine or legitimate use of language (he explicitly recognizes the existence of ‘labeling’ language-games; §1.27). Rather, Wittgenstein is making two points about the naming or labeling use of words: first, that it is not so pervasive and important in language as a whole as we are prone to

4. Cf. A. D. Woozley: “Berkeley is making a general point about symbols (which he calls signs), that not only does intelligent and intelligible handling of them not require a concomitant shadow sequence of images in the stream of consciousness, but it does not require any accompaniment at all” (Woozley 1976, 431-432).

think and, second, that it is not so straightforward and unproblematic as we are prone to think. Wittgenstein's first point is clearly and explicitly recognized by Berkeley, although Berkeley perhaps does not travel so far in the opposite direction as Wittgenstein does. However, I know of no text in which Berkeley recognizes the second point.

I suggested above (§3.1) that Berkeley recognizes a primitive faculty of comparison, which allows us both to recognize ideas as similar or dissimilar, and to distinguish *respects* of similarity. The categorization of a word which Wittgenstein says we need to undertake before we can learn the word's meaning by an ostensive definition is, essentially, a matter of knowing what respect of resemblance (resemblance in color, resemblance in number, etc.) to look for in deciding when to apply the word. How exactly this works is a thorny issue which Berkeley, as I have said, does not face squarely because he does not see it clearly. If, however, we are willing to accept Berkeley's primitivism about comparison then a relatively simple solution presents itself: given a collection of exemplars, we simply compare them along the various dimensions of similarity which come naturally to us until we find a respect in which they all resemble. (These 'respects' are not universals. They are different comparison operations the mind can perform. Thus the operation of color-comparison is both metaphysically and epistemologically prior to color.) We then apply the label 'red' to those things which resemble the exemplars in that respect wherein the exemplars resemble one another.

Our second question is, what is this act of *labeling* or *calling*? One can answer this question, in Wittgensteinian fashion, by calling attention to a particular language-game – in fact, to one that is literally a *game* played by parents with young children. The parent holds up a flash card of a particular color, and the child calls out the name of the color. The child is, in this game, engaged in an act of *labeling* her idea, of *calling* it 'red.'

Now, Wittgenstein would be quick to point out that this kind of thing can only take place in a broader linguistic context. I do not think Berkeley needs to deny this. What is involved in Berkeley's distinction between genuine reference and quasi-reference is not the claim that there are acts of labeling which operate outside any linguistic context. It is, rather, that there is a use of words which involves attaching them to things of which we have a pre-linguistic grasp, and that, among all of our meaningful categorematic terms, only a small, privileged class have this kind of use.

This, however, brings us up against the third and final difficulty. I said that the child responding to the flash cards is labeling *her ideas*. However, if we have admitted that this labeling can take place only in a broader linguistic context, and that language is essentially a public social practice, then how is it possible that the child should use words to label her private ideas? Should we not say, instead, that she labels the *card*?

When I argued, in §5.3, that Berkeley recognizes that language is a social practice governed by public conventions, I was not arguing that Berkeley accepts anything like Wittgenstein's 'private language argument,' or that Berkeley accepted Wittgenstein's more radical thesis that there can be no private rule-following of any kind (Wittgenstein 1953, §1.202). Indeed, my treatment of rule-following in §5.1 supposed what Wittgenstein would never grant: that there is a metaphysical fact of the matter about what rule is being followed independent of social facts such as what actions the community corrects. Given this view about rules, which stops short of some of Wittgenstein's more radical conclusions, we can say that the broader context which is required for an utterance to be an act of labeling has to do with the system of rules being followed by the agent. Absent such a context, it is impossible to say whether, for instance, an utterance of 'red' is an act of labeling (describing) the card which is in front of one, or asking for the red card (in the belief that the card in front of one is non-red), or something else. However, there

is no bar here to the following of a system of rules whereby an agent would use a sign to label her private experience.

This, however, does not yet fully answer the publicity objection, for we must not only explain how an individual agent could make use of a sign which would be a label for her private experience. We must go farther and show how *language* can be used to label private experience, and we must do so in a way that respects the status of the rules of language as public conventions.

The view I defended in §5.3 was that the rules of language are public conventions in the sense that we all follow them and rely on others to follow them. This does *not* require that every instance of following every rule is directly publicly observable. My labeling of my individual ideas can be done in obedience to a public convention provided that I follow a rule which is such that the community follows it and relies on others to follow it. It is possible for rules for the labeling of private sense experiences to gain this status if, but only if, we all have beliefs about what ideas others are having (cf. Craig 1982, 552-558). If you say ‘that looks red’ then, given the conventions surrounding the word ‘looks,’ I will take you to be using ‘red’ to label a visual idea you are having. If I have an independent belief about what your present visual ideas are like, then I can figure out what sorts of ideas you label ‘red.’ Note, however, that this process depends, first, on our having some prior source of information about the ideas of others and, second, on there being more to language than just the labeling of ideas. I have already said a great deal about the second requirement. As to the first requirement, it is necessary first to explain how we can even so much as conceive of ideas as existing in the minds of others. I will undertake this task in my account of our talk about spirits and their actions in §§6.4 and 6.5, below. It is further necessary to explain how we go beyond merely conceiving the possibility of others perceiving certain ideas to come to particular beliefs

about the goings on in other minds. In §8.6 I will argue that this information is provided by the language of nature. Since it is only by means of the language of nature that we know the existence of other finite minds, it is hardly surprising that human language – language by means of which we *interact* with these other finite minds – should depend on the language of nature in this way.

All idea theorists would agree that, in showing the flash card to the child, the parent is giving the child red ideas. The Theory of Meanings holds that the child’s use of ‘red’ can somehow ‘pass through’ the red idea to attach to the mind-independent red *object*.⁵ This is possible because the idea *naturally*, independent of any learned conventions or rules, serves as a label for red things. This, however, is precisely the aspect of the Theory of Meanings Berkeley attacked (see above, ch. 2). For Berkeley ideas are not intrinsically representational, although they can be *used* representationally, by the following of rules. Since we lack prior independent access to mind-independent, external red things, Berkeley’s Internalist Requirement prevents us from learning a rule whereby ideas, or words, would label such things. Nevertheless, if the parent has the belief that such and such course of action will lead to the child’s having red ideas, then the game can go on, quite independently of the assignment of any representational content to the red idea.

I have already argued that even genuine referring terms are associated with other rules besides the rules for reference. In the case of ‘red,’ one of the other rules will allow us to assert, for instance, ‘red is a color.’ This use of ‘red’ takes us beyond the use of words to label items in our immediate, present experience. From ‘red is a color’ we can infer ‘everything red is colored,’ and then likewise apply the name ‘colored’ to

5. The Cartesians hold that in the case of ‘red,’ a secondary quality term, this ‘passing through’ is an error (see below, pp. 393-394), but they nevertheless hold not only that it is possible, but that it is common. Furthermore, in the case of primary quality terms like ‘square’ the Cartesians take the ‘passing through’ to be perfectly legitimate. Matters are, of course, complicated by the direct realism of Arnauld and Arnauld’s interpretation of Descartes. See above, §1.2.

red objects, and so forth. This is what Berkeley is getting at with Euphranor's poker chip analogy (Alc, §7.8): the initial reports of our immediate experience are analogous to buying the chips, the reasoning which proceeds by 'computing in signs' is analogous to playing the game, and the resulting sentences with immediate observational import are analogous to 'cashing in' the chips at the end.

The conclusions, I said, have 'immediate observational import;' but of course if they were things we could presently observe to be true, then we would not need to arrive at them by reasoning. What the conclusions really do, at least in typical cases, is create observational *expectations*. These expectations are meant to be *action-guiding*. As a result, even the most straightforwardly descriptive uses of language (e.g., 'this is red') turn out, on Berkeley's view, to have a crucial 'operative' component: although we buy our chips with observations, we often cash them in for actions. It is sufficient for the meaningfulness of a word that it should have some connection to observation or action and thereby serve some useful purpose. However, not all meaningful words are genuine referring expressions. What secures the status of sensible quality terms as genuine referring expressions is the rule whereby they are directly applied to those things to which they refer. This *does* depend on a prior grasp of the individual objects to which the word is applied, though it does not depend on a prior concept (or abstract idea) of redness. Since all general thought depends on signs, one cannot think about red things in general until one has some sign by which to designate them; however, our ability to learn the use of such a sign depends on our prior ability to apprehend individual red things.

6.2 Occult Qualities

There are many terms which are like ‘red’ in the positions they can occupy in sentences, and in the rules by which they are used in ‘computing in signs,’ but which nevertheless lack the kind of direct applicability characteristic of sensible quality terms. Berkeley calls the entities to which these terms purport to refer ‘occult qualities’ and argues that, strictly speaking, there are no such things (DM, §§4-6, 17). Nevertheless, he does not call for the elimination of all such vocabulary; instead, he defends the view that some vocabulary of this sort, such as the word ‘force,’ should be retained on account of its usefulness:

if, by considering this doctrine of force, men arrive at the knowledge of many inventions in Mechanics, and are taught to frame engines, by means of which things difficult and otherwise impossible may be performed; and if the same doctrine, which is so beneficial here below, serves also as a key to discover the nature of the celestial motions; shall we deny it is of use, either in practice or speculation, because we have no distinct idea of force?
(Alc, §7.10)

The examples of occult qualities Berkeley discusses at the greatest length are the ‘mathematical hypotheses’ of physics.⁶ Berkeley says that, in physics as in many other areas, we are “obstructed by words that are poorly understood” (DM, §1). These words, such as ‘solicitude,’ ‘effort,’ ‘striving,’ ‘force,’ ‘gravity,’ and ‘attraction’ (§§3, 5-6, 17),⁷

6. Following standard 18th century usage, Berkeley uses the term ‘mathematical hypothesis’ to refer to certain *entities* introduced to aid calculation: force, impetus, etc. The hypotheses are the *things*, not the propositions about them. See Peterschmitt 2003, 191-192, 197.

7. The Latin words are ‘solicitatio,’ ‘nisus,’ ‘conatus,’ ‘vis,’ ‘gravitas,’ and ‘tractio,’ respectively. Note that in §3 Berkeley writes ‘nisus sive conatus,’ implying that he takes ‘nisus’ (‘effort’) and ‘conatus’ (‘striving’) as synonyms.

are introduced because they are “useful for reasoning, and for calculations about motion and moving bodies” (DM, §17); “however, when they are used by philosophers to signify certain natures . . . which are not the objects of the senses . . . then they eventually give rise to errors and confusions” (DM, §6; cf. Siris, §250).

Strictly speaking, talk about forces is just another kind of talk about *motion* (DM, §§6, 22; Siris, §240), and motion is a sensible quality (DM, §43). The introduction of mathematical hypotheses serves, in part, to “make notions or, at least, propositions [i.e., sentences] universal” (§7). In reality, “bodies are moved to or from each other, and this is performed according to different laws” (Siris, §234). However, with the help of the “general notions and propositions” made possible by mathematical hypotheses, the physicist is able to construct “universal theorems of mechanics” by means of which “the motions of any parts of the system of the world, and the phenomena that depend on them, become known and determined” (DM, §38). In order to do this, the physicist needs to talk about more than just bodies and motions; the laws of physics can be formulated only by the help of certain quasi-referring terms, such as ‘force.’

Occult quality terms can be used in reasoning in much the same way as sensible quality terms. The mathematical hypotheses of physics are typically introduced with explicit and precise definitions, axioms, or postulates, and this makes them conducive to formal, rigorous computation. Physics is, however, supposed to involve “sensation, experimentation, *and* geometrical reasoning” (§1, emphasis added);⁸ ‘geometrical reasoning’ alone is not enough. Furthermore, physics is meant to “direct us how to act and

8. Luce, Jesseph, and Clarke all translate ‘*experientia*’ as ‘experience’ in this passage. I take ‘experimentation’ to be more accurate to Berkeley’s intentions. In English it is not clear, in this context, what the difference between ‘sensation’ and ‘experience’ is. However, even in classical Latin, ‘*experientia*’ can mean “a trial, proof, experiment” (C. T. Lewis 1890, s.v. ‘*experientia*’). I believe Berkeley means here to use ‘*sensus*’ to refer to casual, unstructured observation, and ‘*experientia*’ to refer to the kind of organized, intentional experimentation undertaken by early modern natural philosophers such as Robert Boyle.

teach us what to expect” (Siris, §234). If physics is to be a genuine science and not a mere notation game, the ‘chips’ must be ‘purchased’ at the beginning and ‘cashed in’ at the end, originating from observation, and ending in actions or expectations, just like sensible quality terms.

Berkeley is fairly explicit about how this works: “no force is itself felt immediately, nor can it be known and measured otherwise than by its effect” (DM, §10; cf. Siris, §250). In other words, there are certain ‘known and measured,’ i.e. sensible, qualities which are the ‘effects’ of a force. These are effects of a particular force in the sense that that force is their *physical* cause, which is just to say that, within our physical theory, they are conceived of as following from that force. Within the physical theory, the laws connect the force to observable phenomena, and it is on the basis of those phenomena that we attribute the force to the body. This also works in the other direction: once we attribute a certain force to a body, we can predict other effects besides the one on the basis of which we attributed the force in the first place. In this way, these mathematical hypotheses guide our actions and expectations.⁹

There is no way of grasping even particular individual instances of force until one has introduced the term ‘force’ within the formal structure of the theory. It is not merely the case that the word ‘force’ has no meaning outside the theory; it is rather that force has no essence or nature (DM, §67) and, indeed, does not even *exist* (§39) apart from its role in the theory.

Berkeley has one simple reason for holding this view: because of our lack of a language- or theory-independent grasp of force, we cannot make the word ‘force’ meaningful by using it to label forces (cf. Downing 1995a, 205-208). That is, Berkeley’s

9. For further details, see below, §8.4.

Internalist Requirement (above, §5.2) prevents us from following the rule *'force' may be applied to forces*, or any rule like it.

Berkeley's Internalist Requirement implies that, in order to use 'force' to refer to forces, we would need to be able to think of forces (at least individually) *prior to* the acquisition of the word 'force' and the conventions surrounding it. In Berkeley's view this cannot be done. Perhaps, however, we could secure reference by defining 'force' in terms we already understand. Three strategies for doing this present themselves: we could define 'force' by the *distribution* of forces in the world, we could define it by the *causal role* forces play, or we could give an analysis of 'force' in terms of sensible qualities.

The first strategy is something like the 'Ramsey sentence' approach to theoretical terms (see D. Lewis 1972, 2009). The Ramsey sentence of a theory is constructed by conjoining all of the claims the theory makes, replacing all of the theoretical terms with variables, and introducing existential quantifiers to bind the variables. We then claim that, if the Ramsey sentence is true (or at least approximately true¹⁰) each theoretical term of the theory refers to whatever assignment of the corresponding variable made the Ramsey sentence true (or approximately true). We can demonstrate the application to our present case more simply by switching from 'force' to 'mass,' since mass is a scalar quantity possessed by a single body. The Ramsey sentence for 'mass' would say something like ' $\exists M$ (the acceleration of a body is directly proportional to the force exerted on it and inversely proportional to the degree to which it possesses M & the gravitational force between any two bodies is directly proportional to the product of the degree of possession of M by each of the bodies & ...),' where the ellipsis would be filled in with the rest of the things our theory says about mass. We would also need

10. Berkeley might say: true to some degree. See below, §7.2.

to replace all of the other occult quality terms (e.g. ‘force’) with variables, and add the relevant additional quantifiers. This will complicate matters significantly, but the general idea can be grasped without working out the example in further detail. We would then say: if the Ramsey sentence is true, or nearly true, then whatever assignment for M makes it most nearly true is the referent of ‘mass.’ I described this above as defining ‘mass’ in terms of the distribution of mass in the world because what it essentially does is to look at the circumstances in which our theory tells us to attribute mass to objects and says to let ‘mass’ refer to whatever it needs to in order to make those assignments correct.

If this is to result in ‘mass’ being a genuine referring expression, rather than merely a quasi-referring expression correctly predicated of the objects in question, the word ‘possess’ must be understood in a metaphysically loaded sense: we are not talking merely about ‘mass’ being correctly predicated of objects, but about objects *possessing* some objective feature. Now, for Berkeley, there are no abstract ideas of quality, property, attribute, inherence, etc. There are sensible qualities, on the one hand, and there are actions and powers on the other (see below, §6.4). As will be discussed below, it is a conceptual truth, according to Berkeley, that action and power require will, but it is also a conceptual truth that neither body nor matter can have will, thus if mass is a power or action its attribution to body is incoherent. But, *ex hypothesi*, mass is not one of the sensible qualities we already know. Hence, it must be a sensible quality we don’t know. However, positing such a quality would explain nothing, and is not supported in any way by the evidence which supports the theory.

If instead we follow the second strategy and try to define ‘mass’ or ‘force’ based on what they cause, we fare no better. If we mean simply physical causation, then this

proposal does not differ from the last one, since physical causation is mere regularity.¹¹ If, however, we mean genuine efficient causation then, again, the proposal is incoherent since this would involve attributing volition to bodies.

Finally, we could try to define ‘mass’ or ‘force’ in terms of sensible qualities known to us. This, Berkeley says, is simply to cease using ‘mass’ and ‘force’ in the way physicists do, and so to lose out on the benefits of physical theory, since physicists distinguish force and mass from any sensible qualities (DM, §5; Alc, §7.10).

None of the obvious methods for securing genuine reference for ‘mass’ works. Berkeley believes, more generally, that there is no way of securing genuine reference for ‘mass,’ or any other occult quality term. Nevertheless, some of these terms have a well-defined use in the discourse of Newtonian physics and, furthermore, are extremely practically useful. The conclusion to draw is that they are quasi-referring terms.

Berkeley’s elimination of the contemplated methods of securing genuine reference depends on highly controversial metaphysical views which will be discussed and evaluated in more detail below. However, Berkeley’s most important point about theoretical language of this sort can be appreciated whether or not one accepts those assumptions. It is this: the rejection of the extra-theoretical existence of these entities *in no way threatens the use or purpose of the language of physics* (DM, §66). In fact, the illusion that these are genuine referring expressions leads to all sorts of “well-known disputes that have greatly exercised learned men” (§15), while the rejection of that illusion neatly resolves these disputes, thereby rendering the discourse *more* useful to its intended purpose of helpfully guiding our expectations and actions. Thus the assumption of some kind of linkage between the application of the word ‘force’ to an object and some objective feature that object has plays, or at least should play, no role in the rules surrounding

11. Or something near enough. See §8.4.

the use of that word. This is what it means for ‘force’ to be a quasi-referring expression: although it is syntactically, and hence inferentially, like ‘red,’ the rules of its usage do not tell us to use it to label any one particular feature.

It does not follow from this that ‘force’ is eliminable from physics. Berkeley does say that “general and abstract terms . . . were in fact invented partly to abbreviate speech, and partly by philosophers for teaching purposes” (DM, §7). However, we must remember that a science, for Berkeley, *just is* a sign system (Alc, §7.14). There is no such thing as Newtonian physics without ‘force’ – the imagined construct would be an entirely different sign system.¹² Because of the generality they provide, if “the system of the world” is to be “subjected to human calculations” (DM, §66), one is going to need *some* mathematical hypotheses, and the mathematical hypotheses of Newtonian physics are the best we’ve got (cf. §§38-39).¹³ Thus by Quine’s criterion, Berkeley is ‘ontologically committed’ to forces (Quine 1948): a scientific theory which Berkeley accepts contains ineliminable quantification over forces.

All that follows from this is that Berkeley is implicitly committed to the rejection of Quine’s criterion. The question which remains is: what alternative is Berkeley in a position to offer? How does Berkeley manage to get committed to red but not to force?

The answer is that, for Berkeley, a word purports to be a genuine referring expression (and hence its use is ontologically committing) only when we adopt a rule which gives that word a labeling use. However, it can be shown that every attempt to use ‘force’ to label things either fails (through failure to make contact with the alleged thing), or else

12. Such alternative sign systems are, of course, possible, as is shown by the alternative formulations of classical mechanics developed in the 19th century.

13. John Foster says that Berkeley “goes astray” by failing to notice that “the sensory order can only be adequately specified by reference to the physical theory which it prompts us to accept” (Foster 1985, 87-88). This mischaracterization of Berkeley stems from a lack of attention to the later works, *De Motu*, *Alciphron*, and *Siris*.

violates the other rules for using the word ‘force’ (as a technical term of physics). Thus what we have here is not a mere question of parsimony or theory choice, but a question of coherence: as long as one is committed to using ‘force’ the way the physicists do, any attempt to label anything with it results in contradiction.¹⁴ Thus, as much as one might be committed to sentences such as ‘there are forces’ – or, to use an example from Berkeley’s own text, “The pure æther or invisible fire contains parts of different kinds, that are impressed with different forces” (Siris, §162) – and as much as one may not be able to avoid quantifying over forces in this way, nevertheless, it is not possible (without contradiction) to incur a genuine ontological commitment to the (quasi-)entities physicists (quasi-)call ‘forces.’¹⁵

6.3 Bodies

According to Berkeley, the physical realist’s mistake is to think that “‘force’, ‘gravity’, and similar words . . . are used to signify certain natures” (DM, §6). This is a linguistic confusion (§1) which leads to pointless disputes which interfere with the real purpose of physics, which is to “direct us how to act and teach us what to expect” (Siris, §234). We will be better able to go about the business of physics if we pay attention to the use of

14. This characterization of the conclusion of *De Motu* agrees with Downing 1995a. I have attempted in this section to show why Berkeley, given the rest of his system, accepts the conclusion, and so have appealed freely to Berkeley’s other works. Downing provides an excellent account of the dialectic of *De Motu* and, in particular, Berkeley’s strategy for persuading Cartesians – who could not be assumed to accept, or even be familiar with, his other doctrines – of the conclusion that ‘force’ and other similar terms do not (genuinely) refer.

15. It is worth noting that Quine himself *begins* with a distinction between those expressions which are genuine names and those which are not, and then proceeds to give his famous account in terms of quantification. What I am suggesting is that Berkeley needs to reject the move from naming to quantification: for him, the distinction between genuine names and quasi-names is the fundamental point. Furthermore, Berkeley rejects the claim that whether a word is a genuine name depends on the availability of paraphrases (Quine 1948, 25-28). Whether a word is a genuine name depends, instead, on whether the conventions governing its use instruct us to use it to name something.

such words and thereby come to realize that these things “have no stable essence in the nature of things” (DM, §67).

In the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley’s character Philonous gives a strikingly similar account of the error of the materialist.¹⁶ Philonous had argued in the first dialogue that perceptual relativity lands the materialist in either contradiction or skepticism. “Suppose now one of your hands hot, and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state; will not the water seem cold to one hand and warm to the other?” (DHP, 179). If the materialist trusts her senses, she must conclude that the water is both cold and warm – a contradiction. Thus, if she is to avoid contradiction, the materialist must *not* trust her senses. But distrust of the senses is, for Berkeley, the hallmark of skepticism (PHK, §§40, 101; DHP, 167, 173, 211, 237, 244-245).

In the third dialogue, Hylas argues that Philonous’s (i.e., Berkeley’s) view faces the same objection: we perceive the same body as having many different, contradictory sensible qualities, often at the same time. If, then, the existence and nature of body is given in sensory perception, the same thing has contradictory qualities. Philonous responds:

What . . . if our ideas are variable; what if our senses are not in all circumstances affected with the same appearances? It will not thence follow, they are not to be trusted, or that they are inconsistent either with themselves or anything else, except it be with your preconceived notion of (I know not what) one single, unchanged, unperceivable, real nature, marked by each

16. Following Berkeley, I use the term ‘materialist’ to refer to those who believe that sensible qualities inhere in a mind-independent ‘material substratum.’ The ‘physical realist’ is one who takes the theoretical terms of physics to have ontological import, i.e., to be genuine referring expressions.

name; which prejudice seems to have taken its rise from not rightly understanding the common language of men speaking of several distinct ideas, as united into one thing by the mind. And indeed there is cause to suspect several erroneous conceits of the philosophers are owing to the same original, while they began to build their schemes, not so much on notions as words, which were framed by the vulgar, merely for conveniency and dispatch in the common actions of life, without any regard to speculation (DHP, 245-246).

The materialist is confused about plain language *in just the same way* the physical realist is confused about the formal language of physics. Notice specifically, three parallels between Berkeley's diagnoses of the errors of the physical realist and the materialist: (1) both err in supposing that the words in question designate stable 'real natures' existing independently of the sign system; (2) both make this error because they are in the grip of the Theory of Meanings; (3) in both cases, the grip of the Theory of Meanings is to be broken (in good Wittgensteinian fashion) by attention to the *practical purpose* of the discourse. Given the parallel diagnosis, it is reasonable to expect a parallel cure. This, I will now argue, is exactly what we find in Berkeley's statements regarding the nature of bodies: bodies, like forces, are mere quasi-entities whose existence and nature are the creations of our linguistic conventions. 'Body'-talk differs from 'force'-talk only in that humans have been using it from time immemorial (cf. James 1907, lecture 5; Carnap 1950, §2).

6.3.1 Bodies as Linguistic Constructions

There are two crucial passages in which Berkeley lays out his view of the nature of bodies. In the first of these, Berkeley says that when

several [sensible qualities] 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 brook, and the like things (PHK, §1).

This lines up with a passage from the *Dialogues* where Philonous says that:

men combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times or in different circumstances, but observed however 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 (DHP, 245).

A body, according to Berkeley, is ‘constituted by’ certain ideas which “are united into one thing (or have one name given them) by the mind” (249). Note, however, that, although at the beginning of the *Principles* passage Berkeley says that “*they* [the sensible qualities] come to be marked by one name,” his explanation of how this occurs does not involve the *collection* being called by that name, nor does it involve any of the ideas *in* the collection being called by that name. Rather, Berkeley says that the “colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence” are “accounted one distinct thing,” and *that thing* is called ‘apple.’ Furthermore, Berkeley’s use of the phrase ‘and so’ strongly suggests that the ideas in question come to be ‘reputed as one thing’ *by means of* their association with a name.

In the *Dialogues*, Berkeley says that these various ideas are “refer[red] to one name and consider[ed] as one thing.” Berkeley does say that the use of the name is somehow tied up with the ideas which are grouped together by their “connection in nature,” and

this implies that the use of the word ‘apple’ provides a way of talking about the “colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence.” It does not, however, imply that the word ‘apple’ is a *label* for these ideas, either individually or collectively. Rather, ‘apple’ provides a way of talking about these ideas *in the same way that ‘force’ provides a way of talking about motion*.¹⁷ Introducing the ‘thing language’ gives us a way to organize and predict our ideas, a useful way of *structuring* the deliverances of the senses, helping us to get around in the world.¹⁸

It may be objected that Berkeley does sometimes say that a body (or thing) is a ‘combination’ of ideas or sensible qualities (NTV, §109; PHK, §§12, 38). My interpretation does not, however, deny that the existence of a body consists in certain ideas being combined together. What I deny is that this combination is some pre-linguistic entity waiting to receive a label, like a sensible quality. Instead, it is *by the conventions for the use of the name* that the ideas are combined.

6.3.2 Alternative Interpretations

The standard scholarly interpretations of Berkeley’s account of bodies divide into two categories, which may be called ‘subjunctive interpretations’ and ‘idea interpretations’ (cf. Winkler 1989, ch. 7; Dicker 2011, ch. 14). According to subjunctive interpretations, Berkeley (like later subjunctive phenomenologists) takes statements about bodies to

17. On ‘force’ as a tool for talking about motion, see DM, §§6, 22; Siris, §240.

18. Similar ideas are expressed by Quine 1948, 35-37 and Carnap 1950, §2. Tipton 1974, 210 appears (though somewhat ambiguously) to be making a similar suggestion about Berkeley’s view of bodies. Elsewhere, however, Tipton says that, on Berkeley’s view, ‘body’ talk, though convenient, “involve[s] a radical distortion of the facts” (223). Here I must disagree. The facts are not distorted by the ordinary use of ‘body’ talk, but by the philosophers’ assumption that the names of bodies are genuine referring expressions.

be equivalent in meaning to statements about what humans would perceive under certain conditions. According to idea interpretations, Berkeley identifies each body with some idea or collection of ideas. Standard interpretations, of either family, fail to take seriously Berkeley's remarks about the function of the names of bodies. Furthermore, they fail to get the epistemological facts about Berkeleian bodies right: Berkeley wishes to hold, on the one hand, that we (already) have certainty about the existence and nature of bodies by means of our senses but, on the other hand, there is still much more to be learned by empirical investigation. Standard interpretations cannot hold these two epistemological theses together.

Subjunctive Interpretations

The failure of the subjunctive interpretation of Berkeley's theory of bodies is closely connected to one of the best-known philosophical objections to subjunctive phenomenalism. The subjunctive phenomenalist holds that the claim that there is a body in front of me is equivalent in meaning to some set of subjunctive conditionals about what human perceivers would perceive under specified circumstances. Thus, to know the first is to know the second. However, we never know more than a few of the conditionals which would be involved in such a translation. If all there is to a body is the handful of conditionals we know, then commonsense is radically mistaken about the nature of bodies, but if there is more to a body than this, then, on this interpretation, it turns out that I do not in fact know that there is a desk in front of me. The subjunctive interpretation thus fails to capture what Berkeley takes to be our epistemic situation with respect to bodies.

In addition to the question of whether we really know as many conditional claims as, according to the subjunctive phenomenalist, we ought to know, Quine famously

raised a second worry about this kind of view: those conditionals we *do* know can only be stated by means of ‘body’ talk (Quine 1948, 36-37). This was supposed to show that subjunctive phenomenalism, as a program for reducing bodies to sense data, was a failure, since subjunctive phenomenalism will not allow us to do away with ‘body’ talk.

In this respect, Berkeley, on the interpretation I am defending, has a more sophisticated and plausible theory than the version of phenomenalism criticized by Quine. I have already argued (§6.2) that, on Berkeley’s view, one need not be able to paraphrase away talk about a putative class of entities in order to deny that such talk is ontologically committing. Rather, one incurs an ontological commitment only by adopting rules for the use of a word as a label.

On my reading, Berkeley denies that it is the purpose of ‘body’ talk to label anything. Instead, Berkeley holds, ‘body’ talk is simply a tool for capturing certain practically important regularities in our sense experience. Berkeley can agree with Quine that we could not get around the world without such a tool, but this indispensability argument, for Berkeley, will bear no ontological weight: in Berkeley’s view, body talk is *nothing more than* a way of capturing these regularities.

Part of the way ‘body’ talk accomplishes its purposes is indeed by instilling in us certain expectations at varying levels of detail, regarding what we would perceive in counterfactual circumstances. Nevertheless, knowledge of ‘body’ statements need not involve detailed knowledge of the ideas we would perceive in other circumstances. (Exactly what *is* involved in such knowledge will be examined in more detail in chapter 9.)

Idea Interpretations

Idea interpretations subdivide into two categories, which we may call ‘divine’ and ‘human.’ According to divine idea interpretations, each body is identified with some idea or collection of ideas had by God. As is well-known, although this approach has some support in Berkeley’s text (PHK, §§6, 48; DHP, 212, 230-231, 248, 254), it brings back all of the skeptical problems of representative realism which Berkeley insists his view avoids (Mabbott 1931; Foster 1982, 29-32; Dicker 2011, 268). Divine idea interpretations make the veridicality of our ideas depend on some kind of ‘matching’ between our ideas and God’s, but how can we know that the ideas really do ‘match’?¹⁹

Human idea interpretations, by contrast, identify each body with an idea or collection of ideas had by humans. An interpretation of this sort has recently been defended by Samuel Rickless, who takes bodies to be complex ideas assembled by human perceivers (Rickless 2013, 45-46, 123). This interpretation receives strong textual support in the *New Theory of Vision*:

By the application of his hand to the several parts of a human body [the blind man] had perceived different tangible ideas, which being collected into *sundry complex ones*, have distinct names annexed to them. Thus one combination of a certain tangible figure, bulk, and consistency of parts is called the head, another the hand, a third the foot, and so of the rest. All which *complex ideas* could, in his understanding, be made up only of ideas perceivable by touch (NTV, §96, emphasis added).

This passage causes two serious problems for my interpretation. First, it explicitly associates bodies (specifically, parts of human bodies) with complex ideas and, second,

19. Winkler 1989, 216-224 offers a number of additional criticisms of this interpretation.

it explicitly associates these complex ideas with ‘collecting,’ ‘combining,’ and ‘naming.’²⁰ The most straightforward reading of this passage would take Berkeley to be claiming that the blind man first collects various tangible ideas into one complex idea, then labels that complex idea (e.g.) ‘head.’ This would make ‘head’ a genuine referring term.

Although this is the most straightforward reading of this particular passage, it cannot be Berkeley’s considered view. It cannot be the case that the blind man’s complex idea of the head *is* the head, for the head ought to include visual ideas which, Berkeley explicitly says, the blind man does not have. This is only a vivid example of a more general problem facing the complex idea interpretation: no human has all of the ideas which make up (e.g.) a cherry (cf. Hight 2007b, 86-87). As a result, no human can combine all of these ideas into one complex idea.

6.3.3 The Richness of Berkeleian Bodies

Whereas divine idea interpretations undermine Berkeley’s response to the skeptic, subjunctive interpretations and human idea interpretations fail to recognize the *richness* of Berkeleian bodies: the bodies we know ‘contain’ more ideas than we have ever perceived, imagined, or expected. This issue is addressed explicitly in the *Dialogues*. Hylas objects, “Why is not the same figure, and other sensible qualities, perceived in all manner of ways? And why should we use a microscope, the better to discover the true nature of a body, if it were discoverable to the naked eye?” (DHP, 245). The objection is that, according to commonsense, bodies are much richer than momentary perception. That is, they have many more qualities than can be perceived at any one time. Furthermore,

20. I thank Samuel Rickless for directing my attention to this passage and the difficulties it causes for my interpretation.

there are *contradictory* ideas attributed to the same body, as when a body looks smooth to the naked eye but rough under a microscope. Philonous responds that if “every variation [in our ideas] was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind or individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impractical” (DHP, 245). Thus the *practice of language* necessarily requires that “men combine together several ideas” so as to “refer to one name and consider as one thing” the heterogeneous objects of sight and touch, as well as the heterogeneous objects perceived by microscopes and by the naked eye (245). This combining allows us to say, in plain language, that “we use a microscope, the better to discover the true nature of a body,” despite the fact that, strictly speaking, the object (idea) seen with the aid of the microscope is utterly distinct from the object (idea) earlier seen with the naked eye. By discovering “what ideas are connected together” we learn “the nature of *things*” (245, emphasis added), that is, of bodies (see Atherton 1991, §§4-6).

The examination of a body under a microscope allows us to make a *discovery* about what ideas are ‘combined’ in that body. But this implies that there are more ideas ‘combined’ in the body than the ideas I have experience before using the microscope. My claim, supported by the explicit appeal to language in this passage, is that the conventions regarding the names of bodies can determine, in advance, whether a given ‘new’ idea is to be attributed to the body in question – e.g., whether this never-before-experienced taste is to be called ‘the taste *of* the cherry’ – and that it is by these rules, which command the classification of this idea as a cherry idea, that the various ideas are combined into the cherry. In this way, by means of the conventional rules of language, *we have already combined the ideas before we have perceived them*. The combination is thus a mere quasi-entity: it owes its existence to our linguistic conventions.

If, however, this is Berkeley's considered view, then what are we to make of [NTV](#), §96? We may begin by noting that Berkeley there says "different tangible ideas, . . . being collected into sundry complex ones, have distinct names annexed to them." Berkeley does *not* say: "sundry complex ideas are called by distinct names." Rather, the grammatical subject is 'different tangible ideas.' These ideas are said to have names 'annexed' to them. This leaves the exact relation between the ideas and the names extremely unclear. This passage *does* clearly imply that which ideas go together into complex ideas figures into the explanation of which names are annexed to which ideas. My interpretation can, however, accommodate this fact. In the *Dialogues*, Philonous says that ideas are 'combined together' because they are "observed . . . to have some connection in nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession" ([DHP](#), 245). When the blind man feels, e.g., a head, he feels *at once* (co-existing) "a certain tangible figure, bulk, and consistency" ([NTV](#), §96). This is one complex tangible idea. It is, in part, because of the co-existence of those simpler²¹ ideas in a single sensory experience that all of them are attributed to the same body, and so 'combined together' by our linguistic practices.

6.3.4 Immediate Perception

I have argued that bodies, in Berkeley's view, are mere quasi-entities, like forces. It will certainly be objected to this interpretation that there is at least one powerful contrast, for Berkeley, between forces and bodies: bodies are immediately perceived ([PHK](#), §§38, 95; [DHP](#), 230) and forces are not ([DM](#), §§4-5, 10). Furthermore, since bodies are immediately perceived, they would seem to be available to be labeled.

21. Kenneth Winkler has argued convincingly that Berkeley does not believe in *absolutely* simple ideas, since he holds that such ideas would be abstract. See Winkler [1989](#), ch. 3.

Berkeley's claim that bodies are immediately perceived has caused a great deal of confusion, because it is difficult to understand how this can be reconciled with his insistence in other texts that only ideas are immediately perceived (see, e.g., [PHK](#), §1; [DHP](#), 175; [Alc](#), §4.10).²² These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that it is unclear exactly what Berkeley means by 'immediate perception' (Winkler [1989](#), 149-154; Pappas [2000](#), ch. 6). On what I take to be the most plausible reading,²³ mediate perception, for Berkeley, is *perception by suggestion*. That is (to a first approximation), mediate perception of *B* occurs when, because of some prior connection between *A* and *B*, perceiving *A* leads me to think of *B*. Thus when Berkeley says that bodies are (sometimes) perceived *immediately*, he means that when I perceive (e.g.) a table, it is not the case that I first perceive some non-table idea and, as a result of this, think of the table.

My interpretation can accommodate Berkeley's claim that perception of bodies is (sometimes) immediate. On my reading, the table is a quasi-entity arising from the rules for the use of the word 'table,' and, by those rules, the visual ideas we experience are attributed to (predicated of) the table. When I have a certain brown sensory idea, I am seeing the table, *not* in virtue of seeing an idea which suggests the table, but in virtue of seeing an idea which, by the rules for the use of the word 'table,' is attributable to the table.

I can thus agree that on Berkeley's view we perceive tables, but not forces, immediately. A force can only ever be inferred from perception of motion. Thus a transition must always be made from thinking about motion to thinking about force. However, no such transition is necessary in perceiving a body, and this is because bodies and forces are related to ideas in different ways.

22. For discussion, see Pitcher [1986](#); Winkler [1989](#), 155-161; Pappas [2000](#), 172-208; Hight [2007b](#), 94-105; Atherton [2008b](#); Rickless [2013](#), ch. 2.

23. Recently defended by Rickless [2013](#), ch. 1.

That bodies are immediately perceived means only that they are perceived without suggestion. Bodies can be perceived without suggestion because perceiving an idea attributable to a body is constitutive of perception of the body, and this is the case regardless of whether the particular perceiver actually can or does attribute the idea to the body. The fact that my perception of the body is immediate in *this* sense does not imply that I have the kind of pre-linguistic awareness which would be necessary for names of bodies to be genuine referring expressions. There is, in other words, no reason why a mere quasi-entity cannot be immediately perceived, as Berkeley holds that bodies are.

6.3.5 Predication

The word ‘apple,’ like the word ‘force,’ is a bit of technology for helping us navigate the world of sense experience. Like ‘force,’ ‘apple’ becomes a genuine *word*, rather than merely a sound, and becomes a useful piece of technology, by playing a role in a sign system governed by conventional rules tied to perception and action. However, ‘apple,’ unlike ‘force,’ is first and foremost a subject of predication. Although ‘force’ is grammatically a noun, within Newtonian physics every force must be attributed to a body. This is done, not by speaking of the body ‘being’ a force, but by speaking of it ‘exerting’ or ‘imparting’ a force, or ‘striking’ another object with a certain force. Sensible qualities are also ordinarily attributed to bodies, though here we use the ordinary idiom of predication. Thus we speak both of the apple being red, and of the (mythical) apple striking Newton’s head with such and such a force.

With respect to the predication of sensible qualities, Berkeley says that “to say a die is hard, extended, and square, is . . . only an explication of the meaning of the word ‘die’” (PHK, §49). The usual interpretation of this remark is that Berkeley is endorsing a class membership analysis of predication (Muehlmann 1992, 181-182; Stoneham 2002,

246-249); that is, a die is a class of ideas, and the sentence ‘a die is hard, extended, and square’ means that hardness, extension, and squareness are among the ideas included in that class.

This cannot be, strictly speaking, correct, for hardness, extension, and squareness would be abstract general ideas, and hence Berkeley rejects them. Presumably, what the commentators in question actually mean is that the die includes hard ideas, extended ideas, and square ideas, ‘hard,’ ‘extended,’ and ‘square’ here being general terms which can be used to name the ideas in question. If the sentence is interpreted generally, it will be saying that every collection of ideas which is correctly called ‘die’ includes ideas of these sorts; if it is interpreted particularly, then it will be saying that some particular die includes ideas of these sorts.

The difficulties here are well-known. Berkeley was a nominalist and would not have liked to be committed to classes (Muehlmann 1992, ch. 2, *et passim*; Stoneham 2002, §7.2). Furthermore, Berkeley would need to include in the classes ideas never actually perceived, but he explicitly denies the existence of such ideas (DHP, 234; Bennett 1971, §32; Pappas 2000, 195; Hight 2007b, 93; Rickless 2013, 96-97). These difficulties could be avoided by appeal to divine ideas, but this would create other difficulties related to Berkeley’s response to skepticism (see below, ch. 9).

The thesis that ‘die’ is a quasi-referring term, like ‘force,’ when combined with the interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy of language I have been defending, provides a solution to these difficulties. For Berkeley, to ‘explicate the meaning’ of a term is to provide instructions for how to use it. The sentence ‘a die is hard, extended, and square’ provides instructions for the use of ‘die’ in much that way the formula ‘ $F = ma$ ’ provides instructions for the use of the word ‘force.’ ‘ $F = ma$ ’ tells us that, when a body accelerates (undergoes a change in its state of motion) a force equal to the product

of the mass and the acceleration has been applied to it. If the acceleration is due, for instance, entirely to gravity, then we attribute the force to the body (or system of bodies) whose center of mass the accelerated body is accelerated towards. This is, on Berkeley's theory, simply a rule about the correct use of the word 'force' (see §8.4, below).

The rules for the use of the word 'die' are, in a way, the reverse of the rules for 'force,' since a die is a thing (subject) rather than a quality. What the rule tells us is that 'hard,' 'extended,' and 'square' are among the sensible qualities which can be predicated of a die. In the 'thing language,' all sensible qualities²⁴ must be attributed to some thing. This is a tool by which we *organize* sensible qualities. Thus, for instance, I have a tangible square idea and I ask 'what am I feeling?' – that is, to what thing should this idea be attributed? I am looking for a noun to put in subject position. What the rule tells me is that 'die' is a candidate noun. Thus upon having the square idea, I may assert 'the die is square.' In making this assertion, I would be claiming that the square idea is nomically connected to certain other ideas, among them some extended ideas and hard ideas. (Of course, no idea could be either hard or square without being extended, so there is some redundancy in Berkeley's example.) It is by these very rules of usage that the mind groups the qualities together: for the qualities to be "united into one thing" just is for them to "have one name given them" (DHP, 249; cf. Beardsley 2001, 259).

The fluent speaker of the language has habitual connections between the words and various ideas. Thus, if one asserts 'the die is square,' the fluent speaker will come to expect a square idea to be nomically connected with certain other ideas. Berkeley's apple (PHK, §1) and cherry (DHP, 249) examples can be handled similarly.

24. Or at least all those that are taken to be 'real,' as opposed, e.g., to after-images.

In this fashion, Berkeley can handle both particular and universal predications. When I say ‘this desk is black,’ I am affirming that certain black ideas are nomically connected with ideas that have the organization assumed by the rules for the word ‘desk.’ As a result of this information, competent speakers will expect to receive certain other ideas together with the black ideas in question. Similarly, if I assert ‘all ravens are black,’ I am leading you to expect, whenever you have one of the other raven ideas, to have certain black ideas.

Contrary to what Berkeley says, these statements appear to go beyond mere explication of the words ‘desk’ and ‘raven’ (Brook 1973, 80n7). Furthermore, it seems that they *must* go beyond mere explication, for if they did not, we would be in danger of rendering these statements analytic, and hence necessary (Stoneham 2002, 257-259). Berkeley is in need of an account of contingent predications.

Two answers to this difficulty are possible. First and simplest, it could be pointed out that Berkeley does not say, in PHK, §49, that he is providing a general account of predication. On this interpretation we would say that Berkeley is simply giving an illustrative example, and has chosen to illustrate his point with essential predication.

The second answer would say that Berkeley does not actually recognize this kind of sharp distinction between analytic, necessary statements on the one hand and synthetic, contingent statements on the other.²⁵ On this reading, in saying ‘all ravens are black’ I would be suggesting that the word ‘raven’ should only be used to label black things. If I assert sincerely, then I am already following the rule I am proposing, so it is already a fact about my *use* of the word ‘raven,’ and hence a fact about what I take the *meaning* of ‘raven’ to be, that it labels only black things. If we were to encounter something like a raven in all respects except color, we would have to respond by revising our rules in

25. This would, of course, be an important addition to the list of respects in which Berkeley anticipates Quine (see Quine 1951).

some way, but we would have significant freedom as to *how* to revise our rules. It may be indeterminate whether such revision involves changing the meaning of ‘raven.’

The kind of indeterminacy envisioned here is *not* indeterminacy about what rules are followed by particular individuals – the kind of indeterminacy I argued against in §5.1. It is, rather, indeterminacy about which, among the rules individuals follow, are linguistic conventions. I expect most others in my community to believe that all ravens are black, and hence to follow a rule whereby they do not label non-black things as ‘ravens’ (on the relationship between belief and rule-following, see below, §7.1). Since we all follow this rule and rely on others to follow it, it amounts to a convention. What I am suggesting is that there may be no sharp line between conventional *belief* and the conventional rules of language. The plausibility of this suggestion will be reinforced when I argue, in §7.2.4, that Berkeley recognizes the possibility that the very structure of our language may (and, to some degree, *does*) exhibit systematic mismatch with the world.

The language of bodies is no more (or less) than a new way of talking about sensible qualities. We group the sensible qualities together by attributing them to a common subject, which is to say, predicating them of some noun phrase. This language, like other advances in notation, provides us with new and different ways of thinking, which allow us to represent complicated regularities in our sense perceptions which we would never be able to represent without this technology. Furthermore, once we have the language of bodies, we can develop the language of physics, and thus attribute ‘occult qualities,’ such as force, to these bodies, thereby further expanding the range of natural regularities we can represent. However, as has already been mentioned, forces, and many of the other occult qualities of Newtonian physics, are not attributed to bodies by means of a simple copula, as sensible qualities usually are; rather, they are attributed by

means of verbs such as ‘exerts,’ verbs borrowed metaphorically from the language of *action* (DM, §3), to which we now turn.

6.4 Actions

According to Berkeley, “spirits and ideas are things so wholly different that, when we say ‘they exist’, ‘they are known’, or the like, these words must not be taken to signify any thing common to both natures” (PHK, §142). Indeed, at the beginning of the *Principles*, Berkeley seems to imply that, although there are such things as spirits and their actions, we have no knowledge of them: “besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations . . . about them” (§2). Spirit is not a thing known, but rather a thing which knows, and these here seem to be mutually exclusive. As Berkeley later says, ideas “cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts” (PHK, §27; cf. N, §684). As a result, neither spirit nor its acts are, strictly speaking *objects* of knowledge; the self is rather a subject than an object.²⁶ Nevertheless, “in a

26. That this subject/object contrast is fundamental to Berkeley’s thought is, I take it, the main thesis of Bettcher 2007. For an interpretation along these general lines which is perhaps somewhat less radical than Bettcher’s or my own, see Winkler 2011.

It may be objected to my interpretation that PHK, §1 mentions among the ‘objects of human knowledge’ things “perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind.” There has been a great deal of scholarly controversy over this clause (see Tipton 1974, 74-79; Flage 1985, 421-422; Ayers 2005, 47-48; Winkler 2011, 233-234). I interpret Berkeley here to be drawing a contrast between the *objects* of knowledge and the *subject* of knowledge. The former are all ideas. This commits me to the view that, for Berkeley, there are, in addition to our *notions* of the mind and its actions, *ideas* “perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind.” Note that (contrary to Winkler) this does not carry the un-Berkeleyian implication that the operations of the mind *are* ideas, or that there are any ideas *of* the operations of the mind. On this interpretation, the ideas we perceive when we attend to the passions and operations of the mind are every bit as passive as the ideas of (external) sense, hence they cannot represent (by resemblance) the mind or its actions. They must, like all ideas, be *objects* of the mind’s acts; perhaps some pleasures or pains or moods are like this. In Berkeley’s notebooks, Locke’s ‘uneasiness’ seems to be an idea of reflection (N, §653). For my purposes, nothing much turns on this issue, except insofar as it might be thought to cast doubt on my general interpretation of PHK, §§1-2, so I will not discuss it further.

large sense, indeed, we may be said to have an idea of spirit, that is, we understand the meaning of the word” (PHK, §140 [1710 ed.]). In the 1734 editions of the *Principles* and *Dialogues*, Berkeley introduced a technical use of the word ‘notion’ to capture this ‘large sense’ of ‘idea’ and distinguish it from the narrower sense (§§89, 142 [1734 ed.]).²⁷

Actions and spirits are known only in a sense of ‘known’ entirely different from the sense in which ideas and bodies can be said to be ‘known’. This is what Berkeley means in those passages where he contrasts spirits with objects of knowledge (§2), or even explicitly denies that we know spirits (N, §§576, 576a, 829): when we assert ‘ideas are known,’ the thing we are saying about ideas is something which could not possibly be true of spirits or their actions.²⁸ Nevertheless, we are able to speak intelligibly of actions and spirits – that is, we have notions of them. Having notions is, for Berkeley, tightly connected with understanding words (PHK, §27).²⁹ In what follows, I shall have little to say, explicitly, about notions and will focus instead on how we manage to talk about spirits and their actions. Following the same pattern as our discussion of qualities and bodies, I will first discuss Berkeley’s account of action words, then his account of the attribution of actions to spirits.

Philonous tells Hylas, “I have no notion of any action distinct from volition” (DHP, 239). When this assertion is interpreted in light of Berkeley’s notebooks, it becomes

27. For discussion, see R. M. Adams 1973, 58-59; Woozley 1976; Flage 1985; Winkler 1989, 279-282.

28. Thus we do not need to hold, with R. M. Adams 1973, 63, that Berkeley went through an early phase of development in which he thought the mind was unknowable, and we certainly do not need to hold, with Tipton 1974, 72-74, that Berkeley failed to update the opening section of the *Principles* to reflect his ‘new’ view that the mind is knowable. Berkeley’s consistent view, stated explicitly in PHK, §142, is that there are two distinct senses of ‘know,’ and in one of these senses it is correct to say ‘spirits are known’ and in the other it is not.

29. See R. M. Adams 1973, 59; Tipton 1974, 270; Woozley 1976; Winkler 1989, 281. Berkeley likely got this usage of ‘notion’ from Sergeant. See Sergeant 1697, Pref §21 and p. 33. For discussion of Sergeant’s theory of notions, see above, §1.4.

clear that Berkeley means to be *identifying* action with volition (N, §§621, 635, 644; cf. Bettcher 2007, 72-74). The attempt to separate acting (or causing) from volition, even in thought, is, in Berkeley's view, an illicit abstraction (Roberts 2007, 117-120).

Volition is contrasted by Berkeley with perception (PHK, §27). The latter is in some sense, or to some degree, passive, insofar as we typically do not have voluntary control over which particular ideas we perceive (PHK, §28; DHP, 195-197); nevertheless, only active things (minds or spirits) can perceive (PHK, §§2-3, 6-7, 138). I will not here attempt to untangle Berkeley's uses of 'active,' 'passive,' and related vocabulary.³⁰ Suffice it to say that perceiving, whether it is to be regarded as active or passive, or as active in some respects and passive in others, is nevertheless something which must be *done* by an active being, and is closely enough related to activity to preclude our having any idea of it (PHK, §27; Cummins 2007, §5). For this reason, despite the lack of clarity about whether perception is 'active,' I will persist in calling it an 'action' and treat it together with volition.

According to Berkeley, actions and active beings are to be understood by 'reflexion' on one's own mind (PHK, §140; DHP, 231-233). In giving an account of my ability to conceive of God, Philonous says, "I have . . . in myself some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity" (DHP, 232). In the *Principles*, Berkeley says that just as we conceive of ideas not actually perceived by us by having ideas which resemble them, "so we know other spirits by means of our own soul, which in that sense is the image or idea of them" (PHK, §140). We will come to the spirits themselves momentarily; as for the names of the actions attributed to spirits, this suggests that they can be understood by

30. On this, see McKim 1989; Migely 2007; Bettcher 2007, ch. 5; Winkler 2011, 241-249.

analogy to the names of sensible qualities. As sensible qualities are known in the sensing of them, so actions are known in the *doing* of them.³¹ We have ‘reflective awareness’ of our own actions, and just as we can use words to label ideas we have, so we can use them to label actions we are aware of performing. By this means, action words become genuine referring expressions.

Note that in both the case of ideas perceived by other minds and the case of actions done by other minds, reference depends on resemblance. Berkeley is not here lapsing back into the general theory of representation by resemblance; rather, his view is that I am following a certain rule in determining whether to label ideas as ‘red’ or actions as ‘imagining.’ The distinction drawn by the rule I follow cannot apply to things utterly unlike the exemplars by means of which the rule is learned. A person blind from birth could distinguish soft from hard, and she could use the words ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ in such a way that every idea she perceived was either one or the other. (Her usage would, of course, be non-standard.) Nevertheless, despite the fact that the classification is, from her perspective, exhaustive, there would be no sense in asking whether red was soft or hard. Red is simply too different from the objects which she has learned to classify for it to have a place in her classification scheme (cf. *NTV*, §128). The blind person can still describe red with some of her most general words, like ‘thing,’ ‘idea,’ and ‘sensible quality,’ and she can use the word ‘red’ in a way that is parasitic on the labeling use by sighted members of her linguistic community. What she cannot do is follow rules which directly distinguish among visual ideas.

Our situation with respect to ideas had by other minds and actions performed by other minds is not like the case of the blind person. Even though, since these ideas and actions exist in other minds, I cannot actually apply my rule to them, there is a fact of

31. Cf. Tipton 1974, 267: “Doubting, to take one case of an act of mind, is not an idea because it is not primarily an object for mind but rather something we are aware of through doing it.”

the matter about what my rule says about them, which is to say, about whether my words apply to them (cf. Craig 1982, 556). That there is such a fact of the matter is due to their resemblance to my own actions and ideas. Thus the word ‘imagining’ originally gets its meaning from acts I am reflectively aware of myself performing, but can nevertheless genuinely refer to acts of other minds.

Note further that I do not need to have a red idea or perform an act of imagining in order to think about red or think about imagining (see Alc, §7.7). Once I acquire the rule whereby ‘red’ is used as a label for red ideas, and ‘imagining’ is used as a label for acts of imagining, I can use these words to think about red or about imagining even when I am not presently perceiving a red idea or performing an act of imagining.³² Other ideas, besides words, can also be used as signs in this way.

In this section, we have been concerned only with how it is possible for me to “apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas,” that is, of actions not done by me and ideas not perceived by me (DHP, 232); how my belief that there actually *are* such actions and ideas can be justified will be discussed below (§8.6). Berkeley’s view is that action words initially get their meaning by individuals’ use of them to label their own particular actions, but that individuals can coherently suppose them to apply to actions done by others provided those actions are similar enough to the individual’s own actions that the rule has application to them.

32. If I am thinking silently, I will be imagining the *word* ‘imagining’ (either visually or auditorially), so strictly speaking there must be an act of imagining going on in this case. But suppose I am ‘thinking out loud’ or ‘thinking along with’ a written text; then the word ‘imagining’ will be sensed rather than imagined.

6.5 Spirits

So far, we have seen that the names of sensible qualities and actions are genuine referring expressions, while the names of occult qualities and bodies are not. In this section, I defend the claim that ‘spirit’ and related terms are, on Berkeley’s view, genuine referring expressions. I begin with a careful examination of certain problematic aspects of Berkeley’s thought which might cast doubt on my thesis, then proceed to show how these doubts can be dispelled.

At the beginning of the *Principles*, contrasting spirits with ideas, Berkeley tells us that by the words ‘mind’, ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, or ‘my self’, “I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them” (PHK, §2). Later in the *Principles*, Berkeley reiterates: “the words ‘will’, ‘soul’, ‘spirit’ do not stand for different ideas or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which being an agent cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever” (§27 [1734 ed.]).³³ An even stronger statement occurs near the end of the *Principles*, where Berkeley says that ‘soul’, ‘spirit’, and ‘substance’ “signify a real thing, which is neither an idea nor like an idea, but that which perceives ideas and wills and reasons about them” (§139).

Although Berkeley’s talk of these words ‘denoting’ or ‘standing for’ something favors the interpretation of ‘spirit’ (etc.) as a genuine referring expression, it is not conclusive, for I have suggested that Berkeley has no reason to object to the use of words like ‘refer’ or ‘mark out’ or ‘denote’ in connection with quasi-referring terms. Indeed, as I noted above, Berkeley says that the word ‘apple’ ‘signifies’ the quasi-entity we construct out of certain sensible ideas (§1). Furthermore, we cannot read too much into the

33. The 1710 edition differs only in having a longer list of examples of spirit words.

use of the word ‘real,’ since, as I will argue below (§6.6), mere quasi-entities can, on Berkeley’s view, be correctly described as ‘real things.’

Another factor which favors the interpretation of ‘spirit’ and related terms as genuine referring expressions is Berkeley’s defense of the status of spirits as genuine substances. Berkeley is content to allow spirits, ideas, and bodies all to be called ‘things’ (PHK, §§38-39, 89), but spirits alone are properly termed ‘substances’ (§§7, 135), and the word ‘substance’ (and its equivalents in other languages) connotes metaphysical fundamentality in both the Aristotelian and Cartesian traditions (Aristotle *Cat.* 5 1b11-19; *Met.*, Z1 1028a10-15; CSM, 1:210-211). This is further supported by a passage in *Siris*, where Berkeley says that “mind, soul, or spirit truly and really exists [while] bodies exist only in a secondary and dependent sense” (*Siris*, §266; cf. N, §24; for discussion, see Roberts 2007, 23-24).

This line of thought is, however, again inconclusive. Berkeley’s central claim is that, if ‘substance’ is to be intelligible it must be synonymous with ‘spirit.’ The claim is that *spirit* is the only intelligible concept ‘in the neighborhood’ of what has traditionally been called ‘substance.’ The claim is not that spirit corresponds precisely with the traditional notion of substance.

In defending the claim that ‘substance’ should be reinterpreted as a synonym of ‘spirit,’ Berkeley does not appeal to fundamentality, but instead to two other elements of the traditional notion of substance. The first, and most important, is the notion of *support*, that is, the relation of a substance to (in Aristotelian language) its accidents, or (in Cartesian language) its principal attribute and various modifications (see the previously cited references). It is this element of the tradition that plays the largest role in Locke (EHU, §§2.23.2-3), and it was Locke’s discussion that likely had the most significant influence on Berkeley. Berkeley argues that the only intelligible notion of support (in this

context) is *perception*, and spirit is, by definition, that which perceives (PHK, §§16-17, 49, 135; DHP, 197-200, 234; Cummins 2007).

The second element of the traditional notion of substance which Berkeley takes over is the view that a substance is a thing which can have *multiple* distinct accidents and *persist* through a change in its accidents (Aristotle *Cat.* 5 4a10-20). In Berkeley's view, a spirit, like a traditional substance, can perform various actions and perceive various ideas and persist through a change in the actions it is performing and ideas it is perceiving (DHP, 234). Since Berkeley is, in certain respects, a critic of the traditional doctrine of substance, we should not simply assume that Berkeley associates these traits with fundamentality, as the tradition does.

Furthermore, the quoted text from *Siris* is the only place in his published works where Berkeley speaks of spirit existing in a more primary or fundamental sense than body, and that passage is an exposition of the views of “the Pythagoreans and Platonists” (Siris, §266). Now, Berkeley is clearly sympathetic to the view he is expositing; he says that these philosophers “had a notion of the true system of the world.” Indeed, John Russell Roberts argues, with considerable plausibility, that “one of [*Siris*'s] central aims is to show that Berkeley's metaphysics has its roots in an ancient and venerable tradition that shares his fundamental metaphysical thesis: *it places minds first in the order of beings*” (Roberts 2007, 24; cf. *Siris*, §263). However, Berkeley himself warns us that the “hoary maxims . . . scattered in [*Siris*], are not proposed as principles, but barely as hints to awaken and exercise the inquisitive reader” (Siris, §350). It is only in light of independent argument, based on Berkeley's other writings, that we can have any confidence in identifying those among *Siris*'s ‘hoary maxims’ which Berkeley himself endorses as approximately or entirely correct. As a result, it does not seem that there is a simple, direct textual argument to be made for the claim that ‘spirit’ and related terms

must be genuine referring expressions on account of the metaphysical fundamentality of spirit.

There are, however, two indirect arguments which provide strong evidence for the metaphysical fundamentality of spirit. The first is the way in which perception replaces inherence as the preferred notion of ‘support’ in Berkeley’s theory. The notion of inherence played two roles in the tradition: it was held that, necessarily, every property instance must inhere in some substance, and it was held that every true predication is true because the property denoted by the predicate inheres in the entity denoted by the subject (e.g., ‘snow is white’ is true because whiteness inheres in snow). Descartes combines both elements when he writes, “if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there *must* also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed” (CSM, 1:210, emphasis added; cf. EHU, §2.23.1).³⁴ Berkeley accepts the claim about the modal metaphysics of properties, but rejects the claim about predication (cf. Cummins 2007, 134-138). Similarly, according to Aristotle, non-substances “are said to be because they are, some of them, quantities of [substance], others qualities of it, others affections of it, and others some other determination” (Aristotle *Met.*, Z1 1028a18-20); thus, for instance, it is Aristotle’s view that red exists in virtue of some substance’s *being red*. According to Berkeley, “the existence of an idea consists in being perceived” (PHK, §2); that is, red exists in virtue of some substance’s (mind’s) *perceiving red*. It is in this sense that perception, for Berkeley, plays the role inherence played in the tradition. However, Berkeley explicitly rejects the claim that it follows from this that red should be *predicated* of any substance (mind) (§49). The key point here is that

34. The Latin of the last clause is in fact rather more emphatic than the translation indicates. It reads, “cui illud tribui possit, necessario etiam adesse” – more literally, “to which it [sc. the attribute] may be attributed, and [which it] is even necessary that it be present in.” I take it ‘etiam’ is here used as a conjunction “to introduce a stronger statement” (C. T. Lewis 1890, s.v. ‘etiam’, def. II). Thus the second half of the clause is intended as a strengthening of the first half: not only *may* the attribute be attributed to the substance, it *must* necessarily be in the substance, otherwise the attribute could not exist at all.

the part of the substance tradition Berkeley accepts is the claim that necessarily every non-substance depends on some substance for its existence. This certainly seems to make spirits (substances) metaphysically fundamental.

Second, Berkeley argues that only substances can be genuine efficient causes (PHK, §26). This, again, seems to imply fundamentality.

Non-substances are of two kinds, ideas and actions. Ideas exist by *being perceived by spirits*, while actions exist by *being done by spirits*. This certainly seems to provide the most straightforward interpretation of Berkeley's text. If this is the case, however, it seems that 'spirit' and related terms must be genuine referring expressions, since it does not seem that mere quasi-entities could play this role. The next question we must ask is, therefore, how do we succeed in using these terms to label the entities in question?

In the *Dialogues*, Philonous gives the following account of the matter:

I . . . know that I, who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly as I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms 'I' and 'myself'; and I know this immediately, or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound. The mind, spirit, or soul, is that indivisible unextended thing, which thinks, acts, and perceives . . . My own mind and my own ideas I have an immediate knowledge of; and by the help of these, do mediately apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas (DHP, 231-232).

In the expanded text of the 1734 edition, Philonous reiterates the point twice, in slightly different words:

[T]he being of my self, that is, my own soul, mind, or thinking principle, I evidently know by reflection (233 [1734 ed.]).

I know or am conscious of my own being; and that I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas. I know that I, one and the same self, perceive both colours and sounds; that a colour cannot perceive a sound, nor a sound a colour; that I am therefore one individual principle, distinct from colour and sound and, for the same reason, from all other sensible things and inert ideas ([DHP](#), 233-234 [1734 ed.]).³⁵

It is clear from these texts that our ‘spirit’ talk must originally derive its meaningfulness from its use to label the self. Berkeley’s emphasis on the immediacy of my knowledge of myself might seem to indicate that I can simply apply the label ‘spirit’ directly to myself, in the way I apply ‘red’ to an idea or ‘imagining’ to an action. However, if this were the case then it would appear that I could have a notion of myself which was utterly independent of my ideas and actions, and Berkeley explicitly denies that this is possible: “by the word ‘spirit’ we mean only that which thinks, wills, and perceives” ([PHK](#), §138). Furthermore, Berkeley denies that it is possible to “abstract the existence of a spirit from its cogitation” (§98). This is in line with Berkeley’s famous comment in his notebooks that “existere is percipi or percipere” ([N](#), §429; cf. [N](#), §646). Berkeley later added to this entry the words: “or velle i.e. agere.” Spirits cannot be separated, even in thought, from their perceiving, willing, and acting, any more than ideas can be separated from their being perceived. Thus it seems that we know even our own spirit through our own activity.³⁶

35. The use of the word ‘principle’ in these passages also suggests fundamentality. See [Siris](#), §335. However, this is again not conclusive by itself, since Berkeley explicitly recognizes several other meanings of the word ‘principle’ ([Alc](#), §3.1).

36. This difficulty seems to be part of what led Daniel Flage to the conclusion that we know spirits only by *relative* notions, which he connects with Russellian ‘knowledge by description’ (Flage [1985](#)). However, Berkeley quite clearly claims that my knowledge of myself (one particular spirit) is immediate.

This does not violate Berkeley's claims of immediacy, for Berkeley certainly holds that we know our ideas immediately, or intuitively, yet we surely know them only by perceiving them. The act of perception itself is not the kind of intermediary that Berkeley is concerned to rule out here. Thus Berkeley can hold, consistently with his claims of immediacy, that I know myself in my activity. Perceiving essentially has subject-verb-object structure (cf. Cummins 2007, 139-140). In my perceiving I have immediate knowledge of myself, the subject, and my idea, the object. (Remember, however, that in the preceding sentence the word 'knowledge' must, according to Berkeley, be equivocal: the relation I bear to myself is not, and indeed cannot be, the same as the relation I bear to my idea.)

This provides me with a kind of *de re* knowledge of my self, to which I can now attach a label, 'I'. This will be a genuine referring expression; it is used to label the perceiver. This does not mean that I can label myself in a way that is independent of my perceiving. Even though sensible qualities can be immediately labeled, they cannot be coherently separated from their being perceived.

I now have a label for myself, one individual spirit. What I must do next is generalize my concept of self into a concept of spirit. In order to do this, we simply introduce the practice of attributing ideas not perceived by me and actions not done by me to some other spirit.

Here is a more careful account of how this works. We said above that my rule for the application of 'red' may give a determinate answer to the question of whether a certain idea should be called 'red' despite the fact that I am not in a position to apply my rule to that idea, since I am not the perceiver of that idea. The same applies to action words such as 'imagining.' My rule for recognizing instances of imagining gives an answer to

My interpretation below is able to account for these data while still taking Berkeley's claims of immediacy with the utmost seriousness, rather than trying to explain them away, as Flage does.

the question of whether someone else's act is to count as an act of imagining, but I am not in a position to apply my rule to that act directly, in the way I apply it to my own imaginings. Now what we have introduced is the practice of attributing perceptions and other actions to an enduring subject, the self. This rule can equally well be used in the case of any perception at all, though only, of course, by the one who has that perception. Knowing, however, that any perception must necessarily be self-attributable, since the rules for the use of 'I' and 'self' permit this, I can begin to speak of other 'selves,' by attributing to them actions not done by me. Assuming that the action so attributed really occurred, this will be a genuine referring expression, though it operates, in Russellian terms, by description rather than by acquaintance. My knowledge of other spirits, unlike my knowledge of myself, is indirect.

There is a difficult question here about personal identity; that is, about how Philonous is sure that "one and the same self, perceive[s] both colours and sounds" (DHP, 234 [1734 ed.]). This will be dealt with below, along with the various other uses of the words 'same' and 'one' (§6.6). A second concern, which I already mentioned above (§5.4), is that it is not clear what justification Berkeley has for his claim that every action must be done by someone. The short answer to this objection is, I believe, that we are acquainted with particular instances of action from our own case, and we are able to think about actions in general by the adoption of conventional rules for the use of signs. But we are unable to abstract the action from the mind that does it. Whenever I am immediately aware of any action, I am aware of myself doing it, and I cannot adopt any rule which would apply the word 'action' beyond the scope of those actions which are done by agents.

When this is combined with the impossibility of abstracting causation from action, then we have Berkeley's conclusion that there is an agent behind every instance of causation. However, it is still not clear how we are entitled to the claim that every change must have a cause, a principle which Berkeley uses implicitly in arguing for the existence of God in the *Principles* (PHK, §26). We are frequently aware of changes without being aware of causation/volition/action. Indeed, this is a central premise of Berkeley's argument here: because I am not immediately aware of the volition, I must attribute it to some other agent. However, since I can separate awareness of the change from awareness of a cause of that change, it seems that I can coherently conceive a change without a cause.

Berkeley's use of the causal principle was unlikely to be challenged by any of his contemporaries, and this is perhaps why he does not even so much as state it, let alone defend it (cf. Tipton 1974, 218-219).³⁷ Perhaps, indeed, it was so widely accepted as to constitute one of the conventional rules for the proper use of such words as 'cause' and 'change.' However, as I already indicated (§5.4), it is possible for a mismatch with the world to be built into the conventions of language, so this would not render Berkeley's assumption immune from criticism.

This much, at least, can be said on Berkeley's behalf: if it is really true that we cannot separate cause from volition, then the only possible genuine explanation is one in terms of the actions of an agent (PHK, §107; *Siris*, §237). Thus, given Berkeley's analysis of 'cause,' we are faced with a stark choice: either we say that the observed changes are the actions of some mind, or we say that they happen for no reason at all. 'Physical' or 'mechanical' explanation will, of course, be left intact, for this is

37. Of course, the principle *is* challenged in Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (THN, §1.3.3), and this work was published in 1739-1740, which places it before the third edition of *Alciphron*, and also before *Siris*. Berkeley, however, does not seem to have read it.

merely a matter of subsuming the phenomena under general laws, but there will be no explanation of *why* the phenomena are orderly in the first place, nor will anything at all *make* them happen. Thus if inference to the best efficient causal explanation is justified, then Berkeley's implicit reliance on the causal principle is justified, though the causal principle would here not be a metaphysical law or analytic truth, but merely a methodological assumption.

6.6 Some Ontological Vocabulary

In Berkeley's notebooks, he writes, "'tis on the Discovering of the nature & meaning & import of Existence that I chiefly insist." In the same entry, Berkeley claims that it is due to an error about the meaning of 'exists' that "many of the Ancient Philosophers run into so great absurditys as even to deny the existence of motion and those other things they perceiv'd actually by their senses." Furthermore, Berkeley claims, it is his view about the meaning of 'exists' that "puts a wide difference betwixt the Sceptics &c" and himself (N, §491; cf. N, §§593, 604; PHK, §89). Similar remarks apply to words such as 'real,' 'thing,' and 'being.' In Berkeley's view, one cannot intelligibly wonder whether the things actually perceived by the senses exist; any doubt about this is symptomatic of a confusion about the proper use of 'exists' in plain language (Pappas 2002, 56). To this Berkeley would add that philosophers have not succeeded in assigning any intelligible meaning to 'exists' other than the one they inherited from plain language.³⁸

38. Whether there might be a special 'ontological' sense of 'exists,' distinct from the plain language sense, is one of the principal matters of dispute among the authors of the essays in Chalmers, Manley, and Wasserman 2009. However, the main issue in that dispute is whether a wedge can be driven between the truth (or correctness) of plain language statements of the form 'there are *F*s' and genuine ontological commitment to *F*s. Here, Berkeley is clearly on the side of the 'ontological realists:' he holds that, among the things which can be correctly said, in English, to 'exist,' some exist in an ontologically weightier sense than others. What Berkeley denies is not the existence of an ontologically heavyweight notion of existence, but rather the existence of an abstract philosophical sense of 'exists' which can be used to drive

We shall have more to say about this general strategy when we address Berkeley's response to skepticism in chapter 9. Our task for the present is to understand how, according to Berkeley, the ontological terms 'exists,' 'thing,' 'being,' 'real,' and 'same' get to be meaningful, and how Berkeley's account of these linguistic facts supports his immaterialism.

As we have already observed, Berkeley asserts explicitly that 'exists' is equivocal as applied to minds and ideas (PHK, §142). In another passage he makes similar remarks about 'thing' and 'being' (§89). I will show that, more generally, Berkeley is committed to the claim that all of this ontological language is equivocal across the categories we have so far described; that is, 'exists,' 'same,' and so forth take different meanings as applied to sensible qualities, bodies, actions, and spirits.³⁹ I begin with 'exists.'

6.6.1 'Exists'

Sensible Things

At the beginning of the *Principles*, Berkeley says that "an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of [immaterialism], by any one that shall attend to what is meant by the term 'exist' *when applied to sensible things*" (§3, emphasis added). The word 'exists' takes a distinctive meaning when applied to sensible things, i.e. sensible qualities and bodies. Berkeley treats these two cases together because in both of them existence is inextricably linked to being perceived; there are, however, differences between them.

Lumping 'exists' together with the existential use of 'is' (see DHP, 234), Berkeley draws our attention to the following expressions: "There was an odour, that is, it was

a wedge between the existence of ideas and their being perceived, or the existence of actions and their being done, or the existence of minds and their acting.

39. I leave out occult qualities because Berkeley does not discuss the application of these words to them, and because they do not play the same important role in his metaphysics as the other categories.

smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch” (PHK, §3). The attempt to separate the being or existence of a sensible quality from its being perceived involves an illicit abstraction. Berkeley writes, “as it is impossible for me to see or feel any thing without an actual sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it” (§5).⁴⁰

Berkeley’s reason for supposing that it is impossible to imagine an unconceived sensible quality has been discussed above (§2.2.2). Berkeley’s view is that ideas are intrinsically well-suited to represent only what resembles them *exactly*, but every idea that I could use to represent something is an idea I conceive, hence all ideas represent their objects *as* conceived, and, indeed represent them as conceived *by me*. However, I have been arguing that, on Berkeley’s view, the introduction of conventional rules for the use of ideas as signs can expand our powers of representation. Such an expansion is needed, as we saw above, if I am to represent ideas in other minds. If, however, I can introduce rules whereby I can represent sensible qualities as existing in other minds, then perhaps it is possible to introduce rules for the use of signs whereby we would represent sensible qualities as existing unperceived.

No such rule can be introduced. As we saw above (§5.1), it is essential to Berkeley’s notion of a rule that it be followed by a mind, and there is no rule which could possibly be followed by any mind such that some unperceived sensible qualities would be labeled as ‘existing’ (or labeled at all). In order for a mind to apply a label to a quality, the quality must be perceived by that mind, so there cannot be a rule which instructs anyone to label

40. Muehlmann 1992, 19 claims that this text is ambiguous between an interpretation on which ‘so’ is an ‘inference indicator’ and one on which ‘so’ is an ‘analogy indicator.’ Muehlmann favors the former. He is, however, mistaken. The word ‘as’ at the beginning of the quotation clearly and unambiguously indicates that an analogy is being drawn. Also, the use of ‘so is it’ rather than ‘so it is’ would sound odd if ‘so’ were taken as an ‘inference indicator.’

what is unperceived. Thus any sensible quality that exists is perceived. But it is a truism that the labels ‘is’ and ‘exists’ can be applied to just anything, so any sensible quality that is perceived exists. Thus ‘perceived’ and ‘exists,’ as applied to sensible qualities, label all the same things, namely, every sensible quality. “Their *esse* is *percipi*” (PHK, §3).

In the very same passage of the *Principles*, Berkeley gives a different account of the existence of his table: “The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it” (§3). Berkeley lists three distinct conditions, each of which is sufficient for the proper attribution of existence to the table. No such disjunction is applied to odors, sounds, colors, or figures. Contrary to Ian Tipton, it really is the case, on Berkeley’s view, that ‘there was an odor’ can only ever mean ‘it was smelled’ (Tipton 1974, 101). An odor is an idea (sensible quality), and not a body. The account of the application of ‘exists’ to tables does not contradict the account of the application of ‘exists’ to sensible qualities, for bodies and sensible qualities are different sorts of things, and ‘exists’ is equivocal as applied to them.⁴¹

Berkeley’s aim in this passage is to show that even for bodies existence cannot be utterly separated from perception, although the dependence of existence on perception is more complicated in the case of bodies than in the case of sensible qualities. This is in line with the intention he stated in his notebooks, “to say the things . . . themselves to really exist even wⁿ not actually seen perceiv’d *but still with relation to perception*” (N, §802, emphasis added). The first difference between bodies and sensible qualities is, then, that bodies can exist when not actually perceived. A second issue is that we

41. One scholar who explicitly recognizes the need to separate the account of sensible qualities from the account of bodies is Muehlmann 1992, 13-15, *et passim*.

do not ordinarily apply the predicate ‘exists’ to bodies which are not real,⁴² though philosophers, at least, are (or were in Berkeley’s day) in the habit of saying that dreamed, imagined, or hallucinated ideas exist. Berkeley may be recognizing this point when he uses the word ‘really’ in the notebook entry just quoted. Elsewhere in the notebooks, Berkeley explicitly recognizes that ‘exists’ is not usually applied to imagined bodies, such as chimeras, though he notes that there is no problem with a philosopher, such as himself, extending the use of the word ‘exists’ to say of bodies, as of ideas, that some which are not real (e.g., those that are imagined) nevertheless exist (N, §473).⁴³

To say that a body exists is to say that it satisfies one of three conditions: either it is perceived by me, or it would be perceived by me were I appropriately situated, or it is perceived by someone else. If I am not presently perceiving the table (I am not in the study), then the first disjunct is ruled out, and so my utterance of ‘the table exists’ *in this context* can only mean that either I would perceive the table were I appropriately situated or someone else actually perceives it. This is not a change in the meaning of the statement; it is merely that one of the ways in which the statement could be true is clearly ruled out by the context. This, I take it, is what Berkeley has in mind when he talks about what he would mean by the utterance if he were out of his study.

There are three rather obvious problems with this interpretation of Berkeley, two philosophical and one textual. First, what makes the subjunctive conditional in the second disjunct true (when it is true)? Second, how can we know the conditional to be true? Third, how are we to reconcile this reading with those texts in which Berkeley speaks of bodies as ideas in the mind of God (e.g. DHP, 212, 230-231, 248, 254)? In my view,

42. This is the point behind Tipton’s complaint that Berkeley’s “assumption that whatever I conceive must exist” commits him to the existence of “mermaids and chimeras” (Tipton 1974, 160).

43. Tipton recognizes the availability of a reply similar to this one, and indeed quotes this notebook entry (162-164). However, he does not recognize that there is a contrast between ideas and bodies here, and he also does not draw the connection to Berkeley’s remarks on the meaning of ‘real.’

the answers to all three of these questions depend on Berkeley's theory of the perceived world as a language in which God speaks to us. This theory will be examined in detail in chapter 8, and in chapter 9 the results of that study will be applied to these questions.

Spirits and Actions

The existence of an action consists in its being done, and the existence of a spirit consists in its acting (N, §429). That the existence of an action consists in its being done is guaranteed by the same reasoning which guaranteed that the existence of a sensible quality consists in its being perceived. We know actions in the doing of them, and it is this that gives us the opportunity to label them. As a result there is no possible rule by which the label 'exists' could be given a broader scope, among actions, than the label 'done.' (Of course, the non-existence of unperformed actions is relatively uncontroversial, whereas the non-existence of unperceived sensible qualities is a distinctively Berkeleian thesis.)

The matter is somewhat more complicated for spirits, in much the same way it is complicated for bodies. It follows from Berkeley's theory of time that the mind always thinks (PHK, §98). However, the 'always' here is with reference to that mind's subjective time – i.e., to the “the succession of ideas” in *that* mind. Because of the orderliness of the perceived world, we are able to construct an inter-subjective time order, and in this order it may sometimes be correct to assert that there is a time when a certain mind

exists but does not think.⁴⁴ Berkeley mentions to Samuel Johnson that his early reflections about time led him into the ‘paradox’ “that the Resurrection follows the next moment to death” (BW, 2:293; cf. N, §590).⁴⁵ If this were true, then there would be an important sense in which Berkeley himself, for instance, presently (in 2013) exists but is not presently thinking, for in Berkeley’s succession of ideas there is no idea which can be said to be simultaneous, in the constructed inter-subjective time order, with any of the 2013 ideas. Nevertheless, there are ideas of Berkeley’s which are inter-subjectively before and (if there is to be a resurrection) after the ideas I am having now. It seems, therefore, at least to be a possible and coherent use of the word ‘exists’ to say that Berkeley presently exists on account of the fact that there are ideas in his subjective time which come both before and after the inter-subjective present. Thus just as a body need not be *presently* perceived in order to exist, a spirit need not be *presently* acting in order to exist. This, however, depends on a use of ‘presently’ which is parasitic on a more basic notion of time, namely the succession of ideas in an individual mind. In the more basic sense of ‘presently,’ minds exist when and only when they are acting (and, indeed, there is no time when a mind is not acting).

44. Berkeley certainly sees the need for an inter-subjective time order: “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” (PHK, §97). This would make no sense if the only notion of time was the subjective time of each individual. Unfortunately, Berkeley says little about how the inter-subjective time order is to be constructed from the “succession of ideas.” Perhaps it is Berkeley’s silence on this point which leads Tipton to say that Berkeley’s view of time is “surely unsatisfactory” (Tipton 1974, 275; cf. 278, 280-282).

45. I do not see anything paradoxical about this position, if we take it to refer to the individual’s subjective time; Berkeley’s real reason for hesitating is probably that the theological orthodoxy of this view is questionable. On the orthodox view of the afterlife which Berkeley wished to defend, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §7. Alternatively, it may be that the view seemed paradoxical to Berkeley because he did not see the need to distinguish between subjective and inter-subjective time with sufficient clarity.

6.6.2 ‘Thing’ and ‘Being’

We move now to the words ‘thing’ and ‘being.’ Berkeley writes, “‘thing’ or ‘being’ is the most general name of all; it comprehends under it two kinds entirely distinct and heterogeneous, and which have nothing in common but the name, to wit, spirits and ideas” (PHK, §89; cf. N, §643). These words can be used to label just anything and, indeed, can also be used to quasi-refer to whatever quasi-entities our sign systems have introduced. This, of course, is unsurprising, since ‘being’ is just a noun form of the existential ‘is.’

Berkeley also recognizes two narrower uses of ‘thing,’ a perfectly good plain language use, and a nonsensical philosophical use. Concerning the plain language use, Berkeley writes that “in common discourse . . . the several combinations of sensible qualities . . . are called ‘things’” (PHK, §38; cf. DHP, 251). In this use, ‘thing’ is just a synonym for ‘body.’ It is this use that Philonous has in mind when he says, “I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things” (DHP, 244). There is a corresponding narrow sense of ‘idea’ on which things and ideas are contrasted: namely, a use on which ‘idea’ refers solely to ideas *of the imagination* (PHK, §33; DHP, 251).

There is, on the other hand, a narrow *philosophical* use of ‘thing’ “to denote somewhat existing without the mind” (PHK, §39). Here, the word ‘thing’ has an incoherent usage equivalent to the usage of ‘matter’ to be discussed below. This usage also contrasts ‘thing’ with ‘idea,’ and it is this contrast, Berkeley says, that is the reason for his use of the word ‘idea:’ ideas are the immediate objects of perception and depend for their existence on being perceived. Berkeley denies that it is coherent to suppose a contrast class of unthinking things which are not ideas. However, in the broad sense of ‘thing,’ there are things which are not ideas, namely, spirits (PHK, §39; cf. N, §872).

6.6.3 ‘Real’

Among sensible things, that is, sensible qualities and bodies, some are said to be ‘real.’ In plain language, this word gets its meaning from a contrast with those things that are *imaginary*. Thus Berkeley says, “the sun I see by day is the real sun, and that which I imagine by night is the idea [in the narrow plain language sense] of the former” (PHK, §36). This is an *empirical* distinction. When Hylas asks how Philonous can distinguish “between real things and chimeras formed by the imagination or the visions of a dream,” Philonous responds, in part, that “by whatever method you distinguish things from chimeras on your own scheme, the same, it is evident, will hold also upon mine. For it must be, I presume, by some perceived difference, and I am not for depriving you of any one thing that you perceive” (DHP, 235).

The words ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ are used, in plain language, to label two different varieties of perceptions. As it turns out, Berkeley holds that ‘reality’ comes in degrees: “The ideas of sense are allowed to have *more reality* in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly, and coherent than the creatures of the mind” (PHK, §33, emphasis added). However, Berkeley thinks that, as a matter of empirical fact, “there is no danger of confounding” the real ideas with the imaginary ones (DHP, 235), for there are few if any borderline cases. In our actual experience, there is a wide gulf between the “vivid and clear” ideas “imprinted on the mind by a spirit distinct from us” and independent of our will, and the “faint and indistinct” ideas of the imagination, or the “dim, irregular and confused” ideas in dreams (235). Thus although, strictly speaking, reality, for Berkeley, is a complex notion combining several criteria, each of which comes in degrees, we use the terms ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ as though they marked a sharp all-or-nothing contrast because the ideas we actually experience tend to score either very high or very low on all of the criteria together, rather than to give mixed or borderline results. This is a case,

again, where the conventions governing our sign system build in assumptions about the world, and there is a conceivable course of experience which would cause, not merely the falsity of our utterances, but the breakdown of the sign system (see above, §5.4).

In addition to sensible qualities, bodies are described as ‘real’ or ‘imaginary.’ When we perceive a real body as a body, the sensible qualities we perceive suggest to us certain other qualities, and these other qualities are imagined. We thus attribute to real bodies both real and imagined qualities. It seems that if any of the qualities attributed to the body are real, then the body itself is to be described as real. Note, however, that among the criteria for reality of sensible qualities (ideas) are orderliness and coherence (PHK, §33). Thus it is due, in part, to our success in using the language of body to talk about these qualities that we say they are real. This can help to explain the unreality of after-images: although these may be ‘lively’ or ‘vivid,’ they are not related to other ideas in such a way as to allow us to make correct predictions using the technology of ‘body’ talk. If we attempt to attribute them to bodies, we necessarily go wrong. Hence we write them off as ‘unreal.’

Berkeley does not apply the real/imaginary distinction to actions or spirits. Since Berkeley does not discuss the matter, it is impossible to be certain about his reasons, but a likely hypothesis is this: on Berkeley’s view, imaginary ideas and bodies may coherently be said to exist. They exist, that is, in the mind of the one who imagines them. Thus the real/imaginary distinction is a distinction between two kinds of existing things (although, as I said above, the word ‘exist’ is not usually applied to imaginary bodies; my point here is simply that it may coherently be used in this way). However, Berkeley would not, I think, admit that such a distinction can be drawn between minds. Fictional characters, for instance, are not existing things with ‘less reality’ than us; neither they

nor their actions exist at all. Thus ‘real’ as applied to spirits and actions can only mean ‘existing.’

6.6.4 ‘Same’

We now turn, finally, to the meaning of ‘same’ and the related term ‘one.’ In the *Dialogues*, Philonous distinguishes between two senses of ‘same.’ “Strictly speaking,” he says, “we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope which was by the naked eye” (DHP, 245). Immediately after this remark, Philonous introduces the notion, discussed above, that these qualities are attributed to a body in virtue of their lawful connections. Then, he talks about “examin[ing] by my other senses a thing I have seen” (245). This commits him to the claim that there is an intelligible (though non-strict) sense in which we may “see the same object that we feel:” the thing he saw before is the thing he will now feel. Clearly what it means to see and feel the same thing in this non-strict sense is just to have a visible idea and a tangible idea which are correctly attributed to the same body. Sameness of bodies is a rather tricky matter, and there is danger of being caught up in purely verbal disputes, especially if one is under the illusion that there exists an ‘abstracted idea of identity’ (248). The fundamental facts are just facts about which ideas are connected with which other ideas. We then adopt conventions whereby we attribute these ideas to bodies and call these bodies the same or different from one another. Similarly, there are verbal disputes among philosophers about the application of ‘same’ to ideas. On one interpretation, two people may be said to have the same idea if they are having sufficiently qualitatively similar experiences; on another interpretation it is impossible, by definition, for two people to have the same idea (DHP, 247; cf. N, §568). There is, according to Berkeley,

no substantive fact at issue.⁴⁶ This is merely a dispute about the meaning of ‘same.’ Since we are here talking about a technical usage of ‘same,’ the problem is to be solved by stipulation.⁴⁷

Berkeley’s views on sameness of bodies can be further clarified by considering his remarks on the closely related terms ‘one’ and ‘unit.’ Berkeley writes,

number . . . is entirely the creature of the mind, considering either an idea by itself, or in any combination of ideas to which it gives one name, and so makes it pass for an unit. According as the mind variously combines its ideas, the unit varies . . . We call a window one, a chimney one, and yet a house in which there are many windows and many chimneys has an equal right to be called one . . . Whatever, therefore, the mind considers as one, that is an unit. 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 shows it to be most convenient: without which our ideas had never been collected into such sundry distinct combinations as they now are (NTV, §109; cf. PHK, §12; Siris, §§288, 346-347).

In this passage note first how closely Berkeley connects ‘considering’ with ‘calling.’ On the interpretation I have been developing, this close connection is quite understandable: in order to consider the ideas as one thing (body), I need to engage in the linguistic practice of *attributing* those ideas to a body, and I can do this only if I have some way

46. For a detailed defense of this line of interpretation of Berkeley’s view about sameness of ideas, see Bettcher 2007, 89-95.

47. At one point in his notebooks, Berkeley also warns that we are in danger of purely verbal disputes about sameness of ‘Will’ (N, §714); ‘will’ is, of course, just another name for spirit (PHK, §27). Berkeley’s views about sameness of spirits are quite difficult to reconstruct. See below.

of talking about that body, or, in other words, only if that body has been introduced as a quasi-entity in some sign system. The introduction of such a quasi-entity *requires* a name. (Of course, we can use the very general names ‘thing’ or ‘body’ rather than having a particular name.)

In Berkeley’s view, it is by the conventions for attributing qualities to bodies that the various ideas come to constitute one and the same thing. These conventions are conceptually relative: that is, they depend on what *kind* of body we are talking about.⁴⁸ Like the other conventions of plain language, these are adapted to practical uses and hence not perfectly precise (MI, §19; DHP, 245-246). This is why there is danger of purely verbal disputes about the sameness, for instance, of houses over time (DHP, 248).

Berkeley says little about the sameness of spirits. As a result, it is impossible to be certain what his view was. There are, however, comments in *Siris* which lead to an intriguing speculation. There Berkeley says that “number . . . is an *act* of the mind” (*Siris*, §288, emphasis added), and he contrasts spirits with bodies, saying that “the person or mind of all created beings seemeth alone indivisible, and to partake most of unity. But sensible things are rather considered as one than truly so” (§347). Berkeley also approvingly cites the dictum of Aristotle that “it is the mind that maketh each thing to be one” (*Siris*, §356; quoting Aristotle *De Anima*, Γ6 430b5-6), and at one point describes the human person as “the self-thinking individual” (*Siris*, §257). The rather speculative conclusion I would draw from this is that Berkeley’s claim that unity, and hence number, stems from an act of the mind is an absolutely unrestricted claim, applying even to spirits. Spirits, on this interpretation, are ‘self-thinking individuals’ who necessarily *unify themselves* by the reflective awareness in which the self is considered as one. This

48. Here Berkeley is no doubt following Locke (EHU, ch. 2.27).

is why spirits are more truly one than bodies: a spirit is *literally* (to use the Scholastic phrase) ‘unum per se,’ one through or by itself, whereas a body is ‘unum per accidens,’ or, more accurately, ‘unum per aliud’ – one through or by another. Being ‘unum per se’ is another traditional mark of *substance*, hence this also fits nicely with Berkeley’s desire to see minds as substances. Furthermore, this reading would line up with Berkeley’s remark that “it should seem that personality is the indivisible center of the soul or mind, which is a monad so far forth as she is a person” (Siris, §346), for it would take consciousness of oneself as author of an action, Locke’s criterion of personal identity (EHU, §2.27.9), as the metaphysical basis for identity of substances.

A similar approach to Berkeley’s theory of mind has been developed in great detail by John Russell Roberts (Roberts 2007, ch. 4). However, I take issue with Roberts’ account on two points. First, on the account under consideration Berkeley is co-opting Locke’s criterion of personal identity to do a great deal of metaphysical work. Persons are fundamental to Berkeley’s ontology, and they are the fundamental explainers in metaphysics, which is where all genuine explanation takes place. Roberts has Berkeley doing this while at the same time taking seriously Locke’s claim that “*Person* ... is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit” (EHU, §2.27.26; Roberts 2007, 100-102). Due to his understanding of Berkeley’s meta-ethics, this tight connection between the word ‘person’ and moral discourse leads Roberts to attribute to Berkeley the view that ‘person,’ and hence its synonym ‘spirit,’ is a *non-cognitive* term (Roberts 2007, 81-82). I have already argued that Berkeley recognizes no sharp distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive, and also that he takes ‘spirit’ to be a genuine referring term. Hence I cannot accept this conclusion. Besides this, to let ethics drive metaphysics in this way leads, as Roberts explicitly recognizes (96-97), to a quite strong form of pragmatism. I will argue below (§7.2.2) that, although considerations of utility

enter into Berkeley's understanding of truth, Berkeley sees a wider gap between utility and truth than would be permitted by this sort of pragmatism. Thus although I think Locke meant his claim about 'person' being a 'forensic' term quite seriously, it seems to me that *if* Berkeley uses Locke's account in the way Roberts suggests, he must be seen as taking Locke's account out of that 'forensic' context, and making it properly metaphysical rather than merely moral.

The second point on which I disagree with Roberts is simply that, as I have already said, I think this account must be regarded as quite speculative. Roberts apparently believes that, on the basis of these texts from *Siris* and other elements of Berkeley's thought we can reconstruct with some confidence the account of spirits that would have appeared in the projected Part II of the *Principles* (see, e.g., Roberts 2007, 118). However, as I have already noted, it is extremely difficult to determine which of the claims in *Siris* Berkeley actually endorses. The claims about unity in *Siris*, §§346-347, for instance, are prefaced with "According to the Platonic philosophy. . ." Furthermore, in *Alciphron* Berkeley seems to think that there are unresolved problems with Locke's account of personal identity (*Alc*, §7.11), and there is not even the slightest hint of a solution to these problems anywhere in Berkeley's writings. On this basis, I would make a further claim: not only is this account of Berkeley's view quite speculative, but if he held this view at all, he held it tentatively.⁴⁹ What is certainly true is that Berkeley did not give any other account of 'same' as applied to spirits.

49. Many previous commentators have suggested that Berkeley was never fully satisfied with his account of spirit, and that this may indeed be one of the reasons why Part II of the *Principles* was never completed. See, e.g., Tipton 1974, 258-262; Muehlmann 1992, 246; Stoneham 2002, 212-213. However, these commentators have not typically looked carefully at the material in *Alciphron* and *Siris* which bears on the question, and in this respect, although Roberts overstates his case, his work on the subject represents a significant advance.

6.7 Matter

According to Berkeley, the words ‘absolute existence of sensible objects in themselves, or without the mind,’ “make out either a direct contradiction, or else nothing at all” (PHK, §24). This, however, is precisely what ‘matter’ is supposed to be (PHK, §76; DHP, 216, 225, 261). Thus, Philonous concludes that in using the word ‘matter’ one “mean[s] nothing at all, [and] employ[s] words to no manner of purpose, without any design or signification whatsoever” (DHP, 223). Given the interpretation of Berkeley’s general philosophy of language I have been defending, we may read the second clause as a gloss on the first: to ‘mean nothing at all’ just is to ‘employ words to no manner of purpose.’ Similarly, Philonous charges that in his various attempts to find a referent for the word ‘matter,’ Hylas “ha[s] been only supposing [he] know[s] not what, for no manner of reason and to no kind of use” (220). This is radically different from the quasi-entities stipulated in physics; those have a very important purpose and use, but ‘matter’ has none. Although ‘matter’ appears grammatically to be a referring term, it is in fact neither a genuine referring term nor a quasi-referring term; it is simply nonsense.

The reason for this is quite simple. Matter is supposed to be the unthinking substratum of perceived qualities. However, as we have seen, the claim ‘sensible qualities exist unperceived,’ is either contradictory (if ‘exists’ is used as a synonym of ‘perceived’) or meaningless (since no other meaning can here be assigned to ‘exists’). Therefore, no unthinking thing can preserve sensible qualities in existence. Furthermore, the notion of ‘supporting’ qualities – the key notion in the concept of ‘substratum’ – can only possibly be understood as *perceiving* them. Hence either ‘substratum’ is meaningless, or it is the perceiving spirit, not the alleged unthinking thing, that is the substratum. Hence we cannot introduce the word ‘matter’ by means of the description ‘unthinking substratum,’ for that description is incoherent.

Note that the point here is not just that ‘matter’ could not possibly be used to label entities (i.e., that it is not a genuine referring term); the point is that the word ‘matter,’ as it is here defined, cannot be used to do *anything* (except confuse poor Hylas). Either the definition is contradictory, and so we are given instructions for the word’s application which cannot be followed, or else the definition contains terms which are themselves meaningless, and so we are not given any instructions for its use at all.

No help can be got by making matter the *cause* of the sensible qualities rather than their support, for ‘cause’ can be given no meaning apart from volition (DHP, 216, 239-240). Nor is it any help to make matter the *occasion* of the sensible qualities, for ‘occasion’ can be given no meaning, unless an occasion is merely an idea in the mind of an agent (PHK, §§69-75; DHP, 219-220).

In the end, the only way to give meaning to ‘matter’ is to make it a synonym of ‘body’ (DHP, 261). There is, however, no need for this, since we already have a perfectly good word for this purpose. Furthermore, ‘matter’ carries metaphysical baggage which we would be better off without. The word ‘matter’ is therefore best rejected.

6.8 Conclusion: Avoiding Immaterialism?

In this chapter, I have shown how Berkeley’s (in)famous immaterialist ontology follows from his theory of mental and linguistic representation. Now, most philosophers find Berkeley’s immaterialism quite incredible.⁵⁰ Indeed, no less a mind than David Hume found Berkeley’s view *literally* incredible, i.e. psychologically impossible to believe:

50. Recent exceptions include Foster 1982, 2008; and R. M. Adams 2007.

Berkeley's arguments, Hume famously wrote, "*admit no answer and produce no conviction*" (Enq, §12.15n).⁵¹ Even for those of us who do not begin from a prior conviction that Berkeley simply *must* have gone wrong *somewhere*, it will be useful to review the steps by which we have arrived at Berkeley's conclusion, in order to inventory the places at which one might get off the boat, so to speak.

In chapter 2, I argued that Berkeley's critique of abstract ideas in the Introduction to the *Principles* is of broad application, showing that the 'meanings' posited by the Theory of Meanings are metaphysically suspicious entities which we would be better off to do without, if we can. I further argued that the elimination of meanings requires the adoption of some form of 'use theory' of linguistic and mental representation on which both words and mental states get their representational content from the way in which agents use them according to rules. In §5.2, I articulated and motivated a principle I called 'Berkeley's Internalist Requirement,' according to which the rules of language must be such that the agent has some independent grasp of the conditions for the rule's application. In this chapter, I developed an anti-Quinean meta-ontology, on which ontological commitment is not tied to quantification but instead to the use of words as *labels*. Berkeley's Internalist Requirement, combined with his sparse theory of mind, guarantees that only minds, actions, and ideas can be successfully labeled. As a result, only minds, ideas, and actions should be admitted to our ontology.

There are two rather obvious ways of escaping this conclusion. The first way of escape would be to adopt a different conception of the mind and its representative powers

51. Hume is likely echoing Hylas here: "To deal frankly with you, Philonous, your arguments seem themselves unanswerable, but they have not so great an effect on me as to produce that entire conviction, that hearty acquiescence which attend demonstration" (DHP, 223; see Raynor 1990, 234; Bettcher 2007, 109). Alciphron makes a similar remark about 'metaphysical' arguments for the existence of God (Alc, §4.2).

from Berkeley's.⁵² If there are 'meanings,' such as Platonic forms, Aristotelian universals, or Fregean senses, grasped by the mind, then Berkeley's entire approach to the philosophy of language is mistaken, and the argument we have been examining never gets off the ground.⁵³ If, on the other hand, the mind somehow makes direct contact with mind-independent external objects, then most of Berkeley's arguments about language can be accepted without drawing his immaterialist conclusion, since we would then be able to label these mind-independent external objects (cf. Craig 1982, 542-544).

The second way of escape would be to accept most of Berkeley's theses about mental representation while rejecting the Internalist Requirement. This would allow us to label external objects despite having only indirect contact with them.

It might be thought that there is a third way of escape, namely the rejection of the significance of the contrast between labeling and non-labeling uses of words I have drawn on Berkeley's behalf. In other words, one could insist on a Quinean quantificational meta-ontology. This would immediately secure ontological commitment to both bodies and the theoretical entities of physics, for I have argued that Berkeley does not believe we should eschew quantification over such entities. However, it is not clear, on this strategy, how the mind-independence of bodies and forces, or the existence of material substratum (or anything like it) is to be secured. Quantificational meta-ontology, as a thesis about how to determine 'what there is,' tells us nothing about relations of ontological dependence or relative fundamentality. Furthermore, Berkeley denies that there

52. Rickless 2013, 188 similarly emphasizes that "[f]rom the perspective of the twenty-first century" the most obvious way of avoiding Berkeley's conclusion is to reject the whole 'Way of Ideas.'

53. I do not, however, mean to suggest that Berkeley has no other considerations to offer in favor of immaterialism if his views on mental and linguistic representation are rejected. For instance, Berkeley shows that issues about perceptual relativity cause problems for certain varieties of materialism, and these arguments are more or less independent of the issues we have been considering.

is meaningful quantification over ‘substrata.’ In other words, the anti-Quinean meta-ontology I attributed to Berkeley is not in fact at the heart of his system; it explains his treatment of bodies and of theoretical entities from physics, but it is not strictly necessary to his basic view that all of fundamental reality is mind-dependent. Thus the rejection of this meta-ontology is not by itself a strategy for escaping immaterialism. One would still need to show how we can coherently separate sensible objects from their being sensed, and to provide a coherent meaning for ‘material substratum.’ It is far from clear that this can be done by adjustments in meta-ontology alone without broader changes to the philosophy of mind and language, such as the two strategies discussed above.

Some, perhaps most, philosophers will be willing to incur the cost of some mysterious metaphysics or the counter-intuitive rejection of Berkeley’s Internalist Requirement simply on the basis of what they see as the intrinsic implausibility of immaterialism. In my view, the alleged intrinsic implausibility of immaterialism has never been made to appear. What is of greater concern, however, is the theory’s *extrinsic* implausibility, that is, its problematic consequences. The most problematic of these consequences have to do with *structure*: how do we get from fleeting ideas to the complex structure of the world of commonsense and of natural science?

We have already made some headway on this topic. We have seen that ‘body’ talk and the technical jargon of physics can be understood as *technologies* whereby we represent to ourselves complex patterns in our sense experience. Language, in other words, allows us humans to structure our experience in useful ways which give us correct expectations about future sensory experience and thereby allow us to order our actions for our benefit and the benefit of others. To say this, however, is only to explain how we are able to *think of* the world as structured; it does not preserve the claim that the

world *is* structured. To stop here and deny that the world really is structured would be problematic for two reasons. First, it would be a radical affront to commonsense, whose defender Berkeley claims to be. Second, it would render the practical success of our linguistic technology a mystery (cf. Putnam 1979, 72-73).

What we want to say, then, is that when, in plain language or in physics, we attribute structure to the world, we are giving a true description of the way the world really is. If Berkeley could not defend this conclusion, this would certainly be sufficient cause to reevaluate the plausibility of the various ways of escape from Berkeley's immaterialism. However, I will argue in the coming chapters that Berkeley *can* get the correct conclusion here. In chapter 7, I will examine Berkeley's views on assent and truth in order to get clear on the sort of objective, metaphysical basis that is needed to ground the truth of our structure attributions. In chapter 8, I will argue that the requisite underlying metaphysical reality – the objective structure of the world which is correctly reflected in our language – can be provided by Berkeley's theory of the physical universe as “a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse” (Siris, §254) ‘spoken’ by God. Finally, in chapter 9, I will show how this approach can be used to solve the most notoriously difficult problem for Berkeley's attempts to accommodate commonsense, namely, the question of how he can maintain that the (philosophically untutored) gardener is justifiably certain of the existence of his cherry tree when no human perceives it.

Chapter 7

Assent and Truth

In 1733, Peter Browne, formerly Provost of Trinity College during Berkeley's time there, and at this time Bishop of Cork and Ross (neighboring the episcopal see to which Berkeley would be appointed one year hence),¹ appended to his *Divine Analogy* a scathing critique of the account of religious language found in Berkeley's *Alciphron*. Browne's critique is long and rambling and sometimes confused, and much of it is in response to Berkeley's rejection of the doctrine of analogy in *Alciphron* IV. Nevertheless, Browne succeeds in putting his finger on a crucial problem for the theory of language enunciated in *Alciphron* VII. According to Browne, it is Berkeley's view "that Words may be *Significant*, tho' they signify *Nothing*" (Browne 1733, 534). On this view, Browne alleges, "Faith . . . is no other than believing in certain Sounds and Syllables," so that "Your believing a God may be no more than Faith in a Monosyllable" and "all Faith would terminate in the Ear" (539). This is the basis for Browne's charge that "in the particular Instance of divine Grace, [Berkeley] in effect gives up the whole cause of Revelation and Mystery" (508).

Browne has, I say, put his finger on a crucial problem. For both Berkeley and Browne, the issue here is made especially pressing by religious concerns: Browne takes Berkeley to be committed to what we would now describe as a form of theological anti-realism, endorsing theological language without taking it to describe an objective reality. Some interpreters would have Berkeley plead 'guilty as charged' (see especially

1. For an intellectual biography of Browne, see Winnett 1974.

Berman 1994, 146-148).² However, if the conclusions I defended in chapter 4 are correct, not only would Berkeley find this unpalatable, religiously speaking, but it would have a devastating effect on his philosophy as a whole. I argued that *Alciphron* VII is concerned to give a general theory of language, and that Berkeley does not accept any sharp demarcation between cognitive and non-cognitive discourse. On my reading, Berkeley does not regard theological language as a special case. As a result, if Berkeley cannot answer Browne's charges, he will be brought to the conclusion that not only faith in religious mysteries, but assent of every kind 'terminates in the ear.'

The difficulty Browne has identified stems from Berkeley's elimination of the Lockean 'mental proposition' (Browne 1733, 510-512; cf. Bordner 2011, 322-323n42).³ In the Theory of Meanings, the mental proposition (or its analog) does important theoretical work. Locke's mental propositions are mental states which represent the world as being a certain way. The having of the relevant mental proposition is what distinguishes sincere from insincere assertions. It is also what distinguishes understanding a sentence from merely hearing the sounds. Finally, verbal propositions (sentences) inherit their representational content from the associated mental proposition. Thus it is only by being associated with a certain mental proposition that a sentence, which, considered in itself, is merely a string of sounds or characters, can come to represent the world as being a certain way. One cannot just delete mental propositions from this picture without providing some alternative account of the phenomena mental propositions were meant to explain.

2. Belfrage 1986b is even more explicit than Berman in attributing to Berkeley the view that our talk of religious mysteries is not descriptive of an objective reality. However, Belfrage's paper is concerned only with the *Manuscript Introduction* and not with *Alciphron*. More recently, Belfrage has said that Berkeley was dissatisfied with this consequence of his early view and "spent the rest of his life trying to satisfy himself on this point" (Belfrage 2007, 51).

3. Although the term 'mental proposition' is Locke's, analogous entities were posited by other theories current in Berkeley's lifetime. See chapter 1.

Although the issue raised by Browne is an extremely serious one, Browne does not acknowledge that it is also one that Berkeley addresses explicitly and at length in *Alciphron* VII. The aim of this chapter is to understand Berkeley's solution to this problem. This will prepare the way for the last two chapters of this dissertation, in which I will defend the claim that it is in virtue of the status of the perceived world as "a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse" (Siris, §254) 'spoken' by God that plain language assertions about bodies are true.

The first section of this chapter examines Berkeley's account of *assent*. We shall be especially concerned to understand Berkeley's claim that faith, which is or involves a kind of assent (Alc, §§7.1, 7.11-14, 7.17), is "placed in the will and affections rather than in the understanding, and producing holy lives, rather than subtle theories" (§7.13). I will argue that Berkeley endorses a theory of belief similar to one recently defended by Eric Schwitzgebel under the name 'phenomenal dispositionalism' (Schwitzgebel 2002). On this view, belief consists in a certain complex of dispositions; however, unlike many 20th century dispositional theories, Schwitzgebel's phenomenal dispositionalism allows that some of the dispositions may be dispositions to experience private mental episodes, such as images in the imagination. On the view I attribute to Berkeley, assent involves a wide variety of dispositions, including dispositions to have ideas, feel emotions, and perform linguistic and non-linguistic actions.

Equipped with our understanding of the nature of assent, we will be prepared to examine the conditions under which one's assent is *correct*, that is, the conditions in which the sentence to which one assents is *true*. Here we will find that Berkeley endorses a form of semantic holism more radical than Quine's. For instance, with respect to the word 'grace,' Berkeley holds not only that it can be meaningful only within the context of a theological theory, but that it can be meaningful only in the context of *the*

religious life. In this respect, Berkeley anticipates the Wittgensteinian tradition in the philosophy of religion. However, in Berkeley's view, one particular 'form of life' (as Wittgenstein 1953, §§1.19, 241 calls it) can better fit objective reality than another. Thus correspondence and objectivity are preserved in Berkeley's theory of truth. Berkeley's view can be summed up in the slogan: realism about truth, holism about meaning.

7.1 The Nature of Assent

To assent to a sentence is to *agree with it*, or *take it to be true*. Berkeley's account of this phenomenon is developed in conscious opposition to Locke, and in particular the use of Locke's theory in John Toland's notorious *Christianity Not Mysterious* (Toland 1696). In Locke's usage, 'assent' is a genus which is divided into two species. Locke calls the first of these 'knowledge' and the second 'belief,' 'judgment,' or 'opinion.' Religious faith belongs to the latter category (EHU, §§4.18.4-6). Both varieties of assent involve the joining or separating of ideas by the mind (§4.14.4). As a result, it is impossible for there to be any form of assent in the absence of ideas (EHU, §§4.1.1, 4.3.1, 4.18.3; Alc, §7.3). According to Toland, this renders belief in religious mysteries, such as the doctrines of various Christian denominations regarding the Eucharist and the Trinity, impossible since we have no corresponding ideas (Toland 1696, 26-27).

Berkeley's strategy in *Alciphron* VII is, first, to show that assent in the absence of ideas is a widespread phenomenon, not only in religion, but in science and in everyday life, and then to provide an account of the nature and possibility of such assent.

That Berkeley is committed to the first claim should by now be abundantly clear; nevertheless it will be helpful briefly to review the examples Euphranor cites in its defense. First, he argues that, since there are no abstract general ideas, there is no one idea which corresponds to any general term. Furthermore, as Berkeley had pointed out

as early as the *Manuscript Introduction*, in ordinary predications like ‘Melampus is an animal,’ the general term ‘animal’ cannot stand for some one of the items in its extension: “if it be made stand for another [animal] different from that [which] is marked by the Name *Melampus*, the Proposition is false and includes a Contradiction. And if it be made [to] signify the very same Individual that *Melampus* doth, it is a Tautology” (MI, §35). But in fact the sentence is neither a falsehood nor a tautology (see above, §3.1). Hence ‘animal’ must here not stand for any idea at all (Alc, §7.7). Additionally, no idea can possibly represent (except as a conventional sign) any action or spirit, yet we can speak meaningfully of actions and spirits (§7.8).

Thus far, however, Berkeley’s departure from the Theory of Meanings is not radical. ‘Melampus’ and ‘animal’ are both *names* or *labels* of Melampus, and ‘spirit’ is a name for spirits. Perhaps, one might think, what happens in the Melampus case, is that one considers Melampus under the name ‘Melampus,’ and considers Melampus under the name ‘animal,’ and recognizes the identity of the object considered in the two cases. This would be a kind of mental “*joining or separating of Signs*,” and it would be correct (true) precisely because “*the Things signified by them, do agree . . . one with another*” (EHU, §4.5.2). Furthermore, this would involve one of the four kinds of agreement Locke enumerates, namely, identity (§§4.1.3-4). On this reading, it is precisely because Melampus is considered under two different *names* that the proposition is non-trivial; hence to take away the names and try to form a mental proposition is to turn it into a tautology. Nevertheless, the sentence satisfies Locke’s definition of truth.

As we will see in our discussion of truth, below, there is something correct about this line of thought: Berkeley does hold that some basic sentences are true because they join terms which label the same object or objects. However, even in the simplest cases, assent, for Berkeley, does not consist in considering an object under two guises

and recognizing the identity of the object. This is because it is possible to understand and assent sincerely to a sentence *without having any of the relevant ideas at all* (Alc, §7.7). Hence assent cannot amount to recognition of sameness of idea. Furthermore, it is only in simple cases that such ideas even exist. Thus in Euphranor's concluding summary we read that the ends of language may be achieved "not only although the ideas marked [by the words] are not offered to the mind, but even although there should be no possibility of offering or exhibiting any such idea to the mind" (§7.17). Euphranor gives as examples the use of 'force' as a technical term of Newtonian physics (§§7.9-10), and "the algebraic mark, which denotes the root of a negative square" (§7.17).

These examples are sufficient to show the falsehood of the general principle that assent requires ideas, and hence to undermine the argument against the possibility of faith in religious mysteries. Much of the negative argument of *Alciphron* VII is, of course, just the attack on meanings from the Introduction to the *Principles*, which we discussed at length in chapter 2. However, *Alciphron* goes significantly farther in attempting to provide a replacement theory.

Some commentators (e.g. Bennett 1971, §10; Berman 1994, ch. 6) would have us believe that the account Berkeley provides is an account specifically of *religious faith*, and certainly religious faith is Berkeley's chief concern here. However, as I have already shown in chapter 4, this narrow interpretation is directly contrary to the text. Euphranor says, "Science [i.e. scientific knowledge] and faith agree in this, that they both imply an assent of the mind: and, as the nature of the first is most clear and evident, it should be first considered in order to cast a light on the other" (Alc, §7.14). Faith implies assent, and if we want to understand it, Euphranor tells us, we must examine other forms of assent, such as scientific knowledge, and see what they all have in common. He therefore proceeds to a discussion of the nature of scientific knowledge, from which he concludes

“that the true end of speech, reason, science, faith, *assent*, in all its different degrees, is not merely, or principally, or always the imparting or acquiring of ideas, but rather something of an active, operative nature, tending to a conceived good” (Alc, §7.17, emphasis added).⁴ Berkeley’s aim is to provide a general account of assent, which takes *all* assent to be like religious faith in involving the will (§7.13).

To understand what Berkeley has in mind here, we must understand what he means by ‘will’ and how it contrasts with ‘understanding.’ In the *Principles*, we read, “A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being. As it perceives ideas, it is called the ‘understanding’, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the ‘will’” (PHK, §27). This way of contrasting will with understanding makes good sense of Berkeley’s account of the origin of science:

the human mind, naturally furnished with the ideas of things particular and concrete, and being designed, not for the bare intuition of ideas, but for action and operation about them, and pursuing her own happiness therein, stands in need of certain general rules or theorems to direct her operations in this pursuit: the supplying which want is the true, original, reasonable end of studying the arts and science (Alc, §7.14).

Scientific knowledge consists in facility with these general rules; it is a kind of *know-how*. In arithmetic, for instance, “the mind is immediately occupied about the signs or notes, by mediation of which it is *directed to act* about things” (§7.15, emphasis added). The point is general: “If I mistake not, all sciences, so far as they are universal and demonstrable by human reason, will be found conversant about signs as their immediate object, though these in the application are referred to things” (§7.16).

4. The talk of ‘degrees’ of assent is likely a reference to EHU, ch. 4.16.

Scientific knowledge is a kind of assent, and it consists (to repeat) in facility with certain general rules. These rules are of two kinds: rules for ‘computing in signs,’ and rules for applying the results to things in the world. This is what Berkeley means by saying that assent resides primarily in the will rather than the understanding: assent is not a matter of what ideas one has (“bare intuition of ideas”), but of what one *does* (or is disposed to do) with them.

Now, for Locke, dispositional assent might very well be described this way, since joining two ideas is something the mind does. Thus I might be said to assent dispositionally to the proposition that snow is white in virtue of having a disposition to join the idea of white to the idea of snow. The act of (occurrent) assent, for Locke, is just this act of joining. One way we could put the contrast is this: for Locke, particular acts of (occurrent) assent are fundamental, and dispositional assent must be defined in terms of these. For Berkeley, assent is fundamentally a (dispositional) state of the will. We may, if we so choose, describe certain actualizations of this dispositional state as ‘acts of assent,’ but Berkeley’s concept of assent is the concept of the state. Furthermore, acts of assent, so defined, will be a radically heterogeneous class, including linguistic and non-linguistic actions, as well as feelings and imaginings.

A believer in a verbal proposition (sentence) is a follower of certain rules. In ordinary cases, these include rules for the manipulation of the signs which make up the proposition, and rules for action. The rules for manipulation of the signs will of course include the rules for *inferring* other propositions from the propositions one believes. We discussed these rules at some length above (§5.4). This manipulation can be internal or external: one can reason ‘in one’s head,’ on paper, or in speech. Another use of the signs in question which the rules will authorize is the assertion of the proposition one

believes, and the use of signs to indicate agreement with utterances of that proposition by others.⁵

When one makes an assertion, one hopes that one's audience will assent to it (see [Alc](#), §6.8). In the Introduction to the *Principles* Berkeley famously claimed that, besides "the communicating of ideas" language has "other ends, as the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, [or] the putting the mind in some particular disposition" ([PHK](#), Intro §20). In light of *Alciphron* VII we can see that, unlike paradigmatic non-cognitive theories of ethical or religious discourse (e.g. Ayer 1952, ch. 6), Berkeley's theory does *not* claim that when we utter certain declarative sentences we are not making genuine assertions or aiming to gain the assent of our hearers. Rather, he is claiming that *assent need not involve ideas*. Assent involves emotions, actions, or, more generally, dispositions of the mind.

One way in which religious discourse and moral discourse contrast with scientific discourse is that they are strongly emotionally valenced. Euphranor contrasts the case in which words "influenc[e] our conduct and actions . . . by forming rules for us to act by" with that in which the influence proceeds "by raising certain passions, dispositions, or

5. I reiterate that by 'proposition' Berkeley always means a *sentence*. Neither Berkeley nor Locke believes in the Fregean 'third realm' propositions widely accepted by analytic philosophers today. I retain Berkeley's use of 'proposition' for two reasons. The first reason is simply to make my exposition terminologically consistent with Berkeley's text. The second reason is that propositions were introduced in philosophy to play certain theoretical roles – for instance, to be the primary bearers of truth and falsity and to be the immediate objects of the so-called 'propositional attitudes' (belief, hope, conjecture, doubt, etc.) – and it is Berkeley's view that *sentences* play these roles. Nevertheless, because there is very real danger of terminological confusion, I will continue to remind the reader frequently that 'proposition' and 'sentence' are being used equivalently.

In order to avoid serious difficulties relating to vagueness and ambiguity, Berkeley needs to hold that there can be *distinct* sentences which are homonymous. Thus the sequence of characters, 'she is going to the bank' may be either of two (or more) distinct sentences, depending on whether 'bank' means river bank or financial institution. Insofar as a sentence is not a sequence markings (or sounds), but rather a sequence of *signs*, this is a perfectly natural thing to say, since a sign is not just a symbol, but a symbol associated with certain rules of usage. A particular instance of the sound or inscription 'bank' may thus be an instance of either of two different signs, depending on which rules are being followed on the particular occasion in question.

emotions in our minds” (Alc, §7.8). It seems that scientific claims belong primarily or exclusively to the former category, whereas religious and moral claims contain a generous intermixture of the latter. Thus Euphranor says of the doctrine of the Trinity, that one may be said to believe it “provided that this doctrine . . . makes proper impressions on his mind, producing therein, love, hope, gratitude, and obedience” (§7.11). Similarly, Crito says of the doctrine of original sin, that “the belief thereof may produce in [one’s] mind a salutary sense of [one’s] own unworthiness, and the goodness of [one’s] Redeemer” (§7.13). The belief (assent) is the dispositional state; the outcomes it ‘produces’ include these feelings of unworthiness.

We can see, then, that assent in general, and religious faith in particular, do not, for Berkeley, “terminate in the ear”; rather, just as he says, they ‘terminate’ in the *will*. In the specific case of faith in religious mysteries, Crito says that assent is “placed in the will and affections *rather than* in the understanding, and producing holy lives, rather than subtle theories” (§7.13, emphasis added). In these cases, there are no ideas to be exhibited, so the difference between merely hearing a sound and assenting to a sentence is constituted *entirely* by the affective and volitional response. The understanding – that is, the mind considered merely as a perceiver of ideas – has no role to play. This contrasts with sentences such as ‘snow is white,’ where acceptance of the sentence is constituted in part by a disposition to form mental images of white snow under appropriate circumstances. (Perhaps the disposition is rather: when one imagines snow, to imagine it as white. Of course the disposition may be overridden in particular cases.) Even in the straightforward ‘snow is white’ case, assent to the sentence is not constituted by a particular instance of imagining white snow. Assenting to the sentence involves a

certain disposition to imagine, which disposition may or may not be actualized on a particular occasion when one hears or utters the sentence. An act of imagination is neither necessary nor sufficient for belief.

It will be helpful at this point to review some of the linguistic rules we have already encountered, and consider their bearing on what precisely is involved in assent to different sorts of propositions.

Let us begin with ‘Melampus is an animal.’ In the *Manuscript Introduction*, Berkeley said that this sentence signified nothing but “That the particular [creature]⁶ thing I call Melampus has a right to be called by the Name Animal” (MI, §34). In §3.1, I argued that Berkeley need not, and should not, regard this as (necessarily) involving an explicit meta-linguistic belief. That is, the speaker need not be disposed to make such meta-linguistic claims as ‘Melampus is rightly called ‘animal.’ Rather, the speaker has, and seeks to create in the hearer, a disposition to first-order linguistic behavior; specifically, the use of the word ‘animal’ to describe Melampus. Assent to the sentence ‘Melampus is an animal’ consists chiefly in this linguistic disposition.⁷ However, this belief also involves the disposition to use ‘Melampus is an animal’ as a premise in reasoning, and by the rules for the use of the word ‘animal,’ the individual can get from here to the claim that, for instance, Melampus is a living thing.

Next, let us proceed to ‘reward’ talk. Suppose Melampus is the lost puppy discussed in §3.2, and consider the declarative sentence: ‘the return of Melampus will be rewarded.’ To assent to this sentence involves a variety of dispositions including, importantly, the disposition to describe the thing given to whoever returns Melampus as a ‘reward,’ and some degree of motivation (however small) to return Melampus. The

6. Brackets original.

7. The problem of ascribing the belief that Melampus is an animal to non-English speakers will be addressed below.

motivation may be negligible in force, and may be overridden by countervailing motivations. Alternatively one may of course understand the sentence without assenting to it. Also, finding out what the thing to be given to the returner is may lead one to stop assenting to the sentence, perhaps because of an overriding conviction that certificates of appreciation are not really rewards.

The kind of disposition to act which is generated by assent to reward sentences is not a raw, ungrounded disposition. As I emphasized in §3.2, promising a reward is not the same as issuing a command. In the latter case, a rule of action is given explicitly, and if it is accepted it guides conduct directly, due to the agent having the rule in mind and following it intentionally. Reward talk, however, produces *cheerful* obedience, because it has the effect of attaching positive expectations to the action in question (MI, §37). That is, assent to ‘the return of Melampus will be rewarded’ attaches a positively valenced emotion to the prospect of returning Melampus. Threat of punishment, of course, works in precisely the reverse fashion.

Faith in the promise of an inconceivable heavenly reward need not, on this theory, function any differently than ordinary beliefs about rewards. The other religious mysteries are more complicated, but the point is general: religious faith attaches positively valenced emotions to some thoughts and actions, and negatively valenced emotions to others, thereby altering our motivational structure, and becoming “a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones” (Alc, §7.10).⁸ Assent to these sorts of sentences also involves the same sorts of *inferential* dispositions as any other syntactically similar sentences.

8. The literal syntax of the sentence from which this quotation is taken strongly suggests that the ‘principle’ in question is grace itself, rather than belief in grace. However, this would make the statement irrelevant to the surrounding discussion. See Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §8.

Assent to a mathematical ‘sentence’ such as ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’ likewise involves both inferential and practical dispositions. The inferential dispositions are defined by the conventions governing the notation. The practical dispositions include, for instance, the expectation that combining two groups of two things will result in a group of four things. Claims in the natural sciences are to be handled similarly.

Finally, let us briefly revisit moral beliefs. As I indicated in §3.2, Berkeley’s is severely underdeveloped, and he seems to have been quite hesitant about it. What is clear, however, is that Berkeley was consistent in holding that “morality consist[s] in the Volition chiefly” (N, §669; cf. N, §149), and he clearly takes this to be a meta-ethical and not merely normative claim. That is, he holds that assent to moral propositions, like assent to religious mysteries, has little or nothing to do with the understanding (i.e. the perceiving of ideas). According to the *Manuscript Introduction*, the aim of describing an action as “Honourable and vertuous” is to “excite in the Mind of the Hearer an esteem of that particular Action and stirr him up to the performance of it” (MI, §41). This suggests that assenting to the proposition that a particular action is ‘honorable and virtuous’ consists in attaching a positively valenced emotion to it, an emotion of a sort which is apt to “stirr [one] up to the performance of it.” As I pointed out in §3.2, Berkeley’s later markings on this passage suggest that he came to think that this account was inadequate to cover all of the uses of these sentences, and so that there is more going on in moral discourse than this. *Passive Obedience* appears to assume some sort of definitional connection between goodness and pleasure, but Berkeley never spells out the details. The central point, though, is that assent to moral propositions, like assent to religious mysteries, necessarily involves the attachment of certain emotions to certain actions.

This, I hope, suffices to make clear the broad outline of Berkeley's understanding of assent. Unfortunately, Berkeley has given us little more than the broad outline. In asking whether this outline can be filled in in a philosophically satisfying way, a number of questions arise. The first, and most important is this. We began by saying that to assent to a sentence is to agree with it or take it to be true. However, it is not at all clear what assent, on Berkeley's view, has to do with truth. It is not obvious, on the view developed, that in assenting to sentences we take the world to be a certain way. This issue will be the topic of §7.2. There are several other issues, however, which it will be well to pause and consider here.

The theory I have attributed to Berkeley takes assent to consist in a variety of dispositions to speech, thought, and action. However, insofar as we are not perfect reasoners, or our linguistic competence is imperfect, or perhaps if we are akratic or otherwise practically irrational, we will not have all of the dispositions in question. Thus, for instance, no human is really disposed to assent to all of the logical consequences of sentences to which she assents. Moreover, we use English to ascribe beliefs to non-English speakers, who do not have the relevant linguistic dispositions at all. Thus the view in question appears to demand far too much of believers.

It is at this point that the account of belief recently developed by Eric Schwitzgebel can be of assistance to us. According to Schwitzgebel, the possibility of 'mixed cases,' in which the agent has some, but not all, of the relevant dispositions is in fact a key selling point of the phenomenal, dispositional account.

It is widely recognized that belief is not an all-or-nothing affair. This is, for instance, explicitly recognized by Locke in his discussion of 'degrees of assent' (EHU, ch. 4.16), and it is central to the Bayesian approach to epistemology. However, what has not, according to Schwitzgebel, been adequately recognized is that belief with low confidence

is not the only kind of ‘in-between belief’ (Schwitzgebel 2001). For instance, one might be able to produce a fact in some contexts but not others, or one might be disposed to affirm in one context or state of mind what one is disposed to deny in another, despite not having any mental reservations or intention to mislead. In these sorts of cases, one does not exactly believe the proposition, nor does one exactly fail to believe it; one is rather in an ‘in-between’ state. Yet this in-between state is not to be explained in terms of a lack of confidence in one’s (dis)belief, or in terms of changing one’s mind. The agent’s mental state is the same throughout.

This can be made clearer by consideration of an example of Schwitzgebel’s, which would be of special interest to Berkeley:

In certain moods and in certain contexts, Antonio feels quite sure that the universe is guided by a benevolent deity. In other moods and contexts, he finds himself inclined to think of talk about God as ‘a beautiful metaphor’ or even, sometimes, ‘a crock of hooley’. When his atheistic buddies at work mock religious belief, he does not join in, but neither does he feel an impulse to defend belief in God; at such moments, especially if it is mid-week, the whole God business seems rather silly. When Antonio goes to church with his wife, he is not inclined to believe everything the pastor says, but, particularly if the pastor waxes poetic about the magnificence of creation, he may feel that there must be a divine force guiding the world. At the birth of a child or the death of a friend, he feels certain God is involved; when the church gossip group has invaded his house, the idea of taking literally talk about the existence of a benevolent deity strikes him as foolish.

Does Antonio believe that God exists? A simple yes or no answer to this question would be misleading (78).

There is nothing particularly unusual about Antonio's case. Yet little effort has been made to understand how, on standard accounts which take believing that God exists to involve some relatively stable mental state representing God's existence, such a case is possible. The 'in-betweenness' of Antonio's belief is neither a function of its content, nor of his level of confidence, but these are all of the resources standard accounts give us for distinguishing between kinds of belief.

Schwitzgebel suggests that a dispositional account can deal with the case as follows. Our concept of *belief that God exists* can be understood as a 'dispositional stereotype' – that is, as a cluster of dispositions which we take to go together (Schwitzgebel 2002, 250). Schwitzgebel offers as an example, *being hot-tempered*. "This stereotype," he says, "will include the disposition to respond angrily to minor provocations, the disposition to be slow in cooling off after a fight, the disposition to feel and express frustration quickly when one's will is thwarted, and so forth" (251). Beliefs can be understood analogously. The unambiguous cases of belief in a particular proposition are those in which the agent has (almost) all of the dispositions included in the stereotype. The 'in-between' cases are cases in which there is a partial match between the agent and the stereotype. This provides a straightforward account of Antonio's case: he has some, but not all, of the dispositions in the stereotype associated with believing that God exists.

Filling in the Berkeleian outline with a theory along the lines of Schwitzgebel's has both philosophical and textual benefits. Philosophically, it provides a plausible account which will do the work Berkeley needs it to do. Textually, it makes good sense of a particular instance of 'in-between belief' which is crucial to the project of the *Principles*, namely, the pernicious sort of practical belief in matter which Berkeley admits to be common to the philosophers and the mob (PHK, §54).

Taking the philosophical issue first, I have argued that, for Berkeley, to be a believer in a proposition (sentence) is to be a follower of certain rules, and that it is the conventional association of the proposition with these rules that makes the proposition meaningful. We have already discussed in some detail the question of implicit belief that someone else follows a certain rule (see above, §5.3). What is involved here is the expectation that the other will act in certain ways in certain circumstances. This includes being disposed to *imagine* the other acting in a particular way when I imagine her in the relevant circumstance. Thus, adapting Schwitzgebel's view to Berkeley, we would hold that our concept of belief is used to lump together certain rules and thus organize our thinking about the actions of others. The 'in-between' cases are cases in which the individual is a follower of some of the relevant rules but not others, or in which the individual is an inconsistent or otherwise imperfect follower of the rules. Berkeley is able to agree with Schwitzgebel that neither of these things is necessarily connected with lack of confidence.

This approach also helps to make sense of Berkeley's discussion of belief in matter at [PHK](#), §54. He writes:

upon a narrow inquiry, it will not perhaps be found so many as imagined do really believe the existence of matter or things without the mind. Strictly speaking, to believe that which involves a contradiction, or has no meaning in it, is impossible . . . In one sense, indeed, men may be said to believe that matter exists, that is, they act as if the immediate cause of their sensations . . . were some senseless unthinking being. But that they should clearly apprehend any meaning marked by those words, and form thereof a settled speculative opinion, is what I am not able to conceive. This is not the only instance wherein men impose upon themselves, by imagining they believe

those propositions they have often heard, though at bottom they have no meaning in them.

Berkeley has argued that, depending on how it is interpreted, the sentence ‘matter exists’ is either contradictory or meaningless (see above, §6.7). Here, he makes three claims. First, he claims that it follows from the fact that ‘matter exists’ is contradictory or meaningless that it is ‘strictly speaking’ impossible to believe that matter exists. Second, he allows that there is a looser sense in which it is correct to ascribe belief in matter to people. In that looser sense, to believe in matter *just is* to “act as if the immediate cause of [one’s] sensations . . . [is] some senseless unthinking being.” Third and finally, Berkeley holds that people have a false second-order belief, the belief *that they believe in matter*.

The proposed interpretation can make sense of all three of these claims. First, it is impossible *strictly speaking* to believe what is contradictory or meaningless, because to believe a contradictory proposition would be to have inconsistent dispositions – that is, dispositions to inconsistent courses of action in the same circumstances. Since two inconsistent dispositions cannot both be actualized on the same occasion, it is impossible reliably to follow the instructions given by a contradictory proposition; hence there is no such thing as a ‘stereotypical’ believer in such a proposition. A meaningless proposition, on the other hand, gives no instructions, or at least problematically incomplete instructions. Accordingly, meaningless propositions likewise fail to give directions which can be followed. However, a kind of ‘in-between belief’ is possible here, and this is what is at issue in Berkeley’s second claim. The practical directions involved in the belief that matter exists *can* be followed, at least in part. As Berkeley makes clear in the closing sections of the *Principles*, his immaterialist arguments aim to secure belief in “a spirit who is intimately present to our minds, producing in them all that variety of ideas and sensations, which continually affect us, on whom we have an absolute and

entire dependence” (PHK, §149). According to Berkeley, “it is downright impossible that a soul pierced and enlightened with a thoroughgoing sense of the omnipresence, holiness, and justice of that Almighty Spirit should persist in a remorseless violation of his laws” (§155). Immaterialism brings God near, and the belief in the nearness of God is *partly constituted* by feelings of obligation to live up to God’s law, and remorse if one fails. Materialism is, on the other hand, the “foundation [on which] have been raised all the impious schemes of Atheism and Irreligion” (§92). Even if the materialist does not fall into outright atheism, materialism puts God ‘at a distance,’ as it were, and thereby lessens the felt urgency of obedience to God’s commands. This explains how Berkeley can hold, at the same time, that belief in materialism is *impossible*, and that belief in materialism is *pernicious*: full belief, ‘settled speculative opinion,’ is impossible, but there is a widespread sort of ‘in-between belief’ in materialism which is pernicious.

Finally, people believe of themselves and of others that they believe in matter. This belief consists in linguistic dispositions and behavioral expectations. This belief must be to some degree defective, since the behavioral expectations it should involve are not entirely consistent. What Berkeley should say about this is that we have an inconsistent stereotype and are unaware of its inconsistency. Since some departure from the stereotype is consistent with belief, we continue to think that people conform well enough to the stereotype, despite the fact that rigorous conformity is impossible.

There are additional problems associated with the attribution of beliefs to individuals who do not speak the language (or are simply not familiar with the vocabulary) in which the belief is described. These too are neatly dealt with by the phenomenal dispositional theory.

Consider, first, the most straightforward case. Pierre, a monolingual French speaker, is disposed to give external signs of assent to the sentence ‘Londres est jolie.’⁹ We ought, it seems, to be able to describe Pierre *in English* as believing that London is pretty, despite the fact that Pierre has no disposition to make external signs of assent to the English sentence ‘London is pretty.’

Although linguistic dispositions are central to our stereotypes, and Pierre fails to exhibit one of the relevant linguistic dispositions, we nevertheless have no hesitation, in this case, in ascribing the belief to Pierre. This is because he exhibits the other relevant dispositions (e.g., the disposition to aesthetic appreciation of postcards from London), and because his failure to exhibit the relevant linguistic disposition is a failure of a well-known and accepted sort. The rules corresponding to a particular instance of assent require that the believer assent likewise to paraphrases (in the same language) and translations (in other languages) of the sentence in question, but it is understood that the believer will fail to recognize translations into languages she does not speak, and will therefore fail to follow the rule in these cases. Thus Pierre is not precisely a stereotypical believer in ‘London is pretty,’ but it is nevertheless unambiguously correct to describe him as a believer, for he has the relevant dispositions of feeling, imagination, and action, as well as the disposition to make outward signs of assent to translations of ‘London is pretty’ into languages he speaks.

This, of course, raises the question, in virtue of what does one sentence count as a translation or paraphrase of another? What is it about ‘London is pretty’ and ‘Londres est jolie’ that makes them translations of one another?

The Theory of Meanings gives a simple answer to this question: the two sentences correspond to the same mental proposition. Having eliminated mental propositions, and

9. This example, together with the various modifications of it considered below, is drawn from Saul Kripke’s influential discussion of this issue (Kripke 1979).

'meanings' more generally, Berkeley is not in a position to give this answer. Nevertheless, Berkeley has significant resources. To believe a proposition is to be a follower of certain rules. Hence Berkeley can appeal to sameness (or similarity) of rules. In the case of genuine referring expressions, this is quite simple: two words which use the same rule to pick out which things to label are at least partial synonyms. If they are associated with other rules, then they may not be precisely synonymous (consider the difference between an affectively neutral racial label and a slur); however, it is simply a fact that it is only in the simplest cases, if ever, that exact sameness of meaning can be achieved between two sentences of the same or different languages. Similarity of meaning is good enough.

In addition to the similarity of the rules, when there is a community of bilingual speakers (as in the case of English and French) there may well be conventional rules of translation, and these rules are just as eligible as any others to help constitute the meaning of a word. Thus, for instance, one of the rules associated with 'London is pretty' may be to assent to it only if one also assents to 'Londres est jolie.' I said above that the rules which the believer follows include the rule of likewise assenting to any paraphrase or translation of the proposition believed; what I am claiming now is that, when there is a bilingual community, the conventional rules which make the sentence meaningful may actually include a partial enumeration of these paraphrases and translations, or some rules for generating them.

In addition to similarity of meaning, a necessary condition for being a translation or paraphrase is, of course, having the same truth conditions. We will return to the issue of truth in the next section.

Having dealt with the simple case, let us move on to the more difficult one, one in which a bilingual speaker has contradictory linguistic dispositions when speaking different languages. Kripke describes the case like this:

Later, Pierre ... moves to England, in fact to London itself, though to an unattractive part of the city with fairly uneducated inhabitants. He, like most of his neighbors, rarely ever leaves this part of the city. None of his neighbors know any French, so he must learn English by 'direct method,' without using any translation of English into French: by talking and mixing with the people he eventually beigns to pick up English. In particular, everyone speaks of the city, 'London,' where they all live (Kripke 1979, 255).

Pierre, we are to understand, never learns that 'London' and 'Londres' name the same city, and he comes to be inclined to assert, and make outward signs of assent to, 'London is not pretty,' despite continuing to be inclined to assert, and make outward signs of assent to, 'Londres est jolie.' The puzzle is, what does Pierre believe?

Schwitzgebel, rightly I think, classifies this as a kind of 'in-between belief' (Schwitzgebel 2002, 265). Pierre exhibits some of the dispositions (follows some of the rules) of each of the pair of contradictory beliefs. However, insofar as the beliefs are contradictory and so give contradictory instructions, it is impossible that he should fully believe both of them at once. It is not that he believes one or the other. Rather, in light of his contradictory dispositions, it is not quite accurate to describe him as either having or lacking either belief. In these kinds of cases, the language of belief or assent is simply too blunt an instrument to describe the rules governing Pierre's behavior.

Berkeley holds that assent consists in the following of certain rules, which rules govern not only overt (linguistic and non-linguistic) behavior but also the having of ideas, feelings, and so forth. This schematic approach is conveniently fleshed out by means of Schwitzgebel's notion of a dispositional stereotype associated with assent to a given proposition. An individual unambiguously believes a proposition when she assents to enough of the central elements in the stereotype. However, there are also 'in-between' cases, in which the assumptions behind our practice of belief ascription – namely, the assumption that certain dispositions 'go together' – fail. Berkeley's account of practical belief in matter is naturally seen as such a case. The central problem for this sort of account is how it can make sense of what is arguably the most salient fact about assent (belief): that it *represents* the world as being a certain way or, in other words, that beliefs can be either true or false, depending on whether they 'get things right' about how the world is. This is closely connected with the more general problem of how a use theory of meaning can provide any account of *truth*. It is to this issue that we now turn.

7.2 The Nature of Truth

It has often been thought that Berkeley was an anti-realist about certain domains of discourse, such as natural science (Tipton 1982, 166-167; Newton-Smith 1985; Downing 1995b; Stoneham 2002, 101-106; Hight 2010; Kail 2010), pure mathematics (Brook 1973, 146-155; Hight 2010), ethics (Belfrage 1986a), or revealed religion (Belfrage

1986a, 1986b, 2007; Berman 1994, ch. 6).¹⁰ By ‘anti-realism about a domain of discourse’ I mean the view that speakers of the discourse in question are not or should not be attempting to make true assertions. Anti-realism about a domain of discourse should be distinguished from anti-realism about a putative class of entities: the former has to do with *truth*, the latter with *reference*. To be an anti-realist about *talk of forces* (a domain of discourse) is to hold that utterances of declarative sentences containing the word ‘force’ are not or should not be attempts to state truths. To be an anti-realist about *forces* (a putative class of entities) is to hold that users of the word ‘force’ do not or should not aim (genuinely) to refer to an object.

Anti-realism about a domain of discourse can take either of two forms, *fictionalism* or *non-cognitivism*. According to fictionalism, the sentences of the target domain have truth-values but, as with the declarative sentences uttered in the course of telling a fictional story, the truth-value of a given sentence is irrelevant to the propriety of uttering that sentence. According to non-cognitivism, the sentences do not have truth-values at all. Each of these views comes in two forms, which are known as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘hermeneutic’ (see Kalderon 2005a, 5-7). The revolutionary varieties make the normative claim that we should change our linguistic practice and aim at something other than truth (e.g., utility or empirical adequacy) in our assertions in these domains, while the ‘hermeneutic’ forms make the descriptive claim that ordinary speakers *do in fact* aim at something other than truth.¹¹

10. Belfrage’s thesis is restricted to the *Manuscript Introduction* (see above, p. 269, note 2), and Berman takes Berkeley’s position in *Alciphron* to be somewhat ambiguous (Berman 1994, 161-163), but both suggest that Berkeley may not have held religious mysteries to be genuinely (descriptively) true.

11. The hermeneutic anti-realist typically also holds that we ought to keep on using language in this way. There is, however, room for at least two other views: one could hold that we *do* use language in the anti-realist way but *shouldn’t*, or that we should reject the discourse under discussion altogether.

Various anti-realist views have been attributed to Berkeley, and there is indeed some reason for thinking that Berkeley does hold a view of this general sort about certain kinds of talk. For instance, he writes, “[i]n 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” (PHK, §52).

The context of this remark is a discussion of physical causation. P. J. E. Kail concludes from this text and its context that Berkeley is a fictionalist about plain language causal talk (Kail 2010, 33-36).

Although Kail’s conclusion has some plausibility, it is not forced upon us, for Berkeley does not say that these useful phrases are false *simpliciter*, but that they are false *if taken in a strict and speculative sense*. What this suggests is that these ways of speaking have an *interpretation* – one which is tempting to philosophers – on which they are false. Berkeley goes on to say that “even in the most rigid philosophic reasonings” it is impossible entirely to avoid these “inaccurate modes of speech,” since they are part of the very structure of our language. Hence the philosophical reader must “collect the sense, from the scope and tenor and connexion of a discourse” (PHK, §52). This obviously includes the *Principles* itself. Thus, Berkeley seems to think that *properly interpreted* these expressions are *true*.

This interpretation is confirmed by *Alciphron*. There, Berkeley clearly holds that, in the language of mathematics, physics, ethics, and revealed religion there are many words which do not stand for ideas. Nevertheless, he repeatedly says that there are true propositions in these domains (Alc, §§1.14-16, 2.6, 5.9-10, 6.28, 7.10, 7.18).

The correct conclusion to draw, then, is that Berkeley is, in fact, a realist about these crucial domains of discourse. That is, he holds that statements in mathematics,

physics, ethics, and revealed religion can be genuinely *true*, despite the fact that they will typically contain words which do not stand for ideas. But how can Berkeley maintain this?

The interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy of language which we have so far developed provides reason to associate Berkeley with any of three distinct well-known approaches to theorizing about truth: deflationism, pragmatism, and Carnapian relativism. In what follows, I examine each of these interpretations in turn and find that each captures an aspect of Berkeley's thought, but none is ultimately satisfactory. After this, I develop what I take to be the correct account of Berkeley's thought on the subject: the combination of a realist (correspondence) theory of truth with a very strong version of holism about meaning.

7.2.1 Berkeley and Deflationism

In light of the interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy of language I have so far defended, the most obvious account of truth to attribute to Berkeley would be some form of deflationism. Given that, as I have argued, it is Berkeley's view that words get to be meaningful by being associated with rules of use, it seems that in order to answer the question at hand we ought to attend to the rules of use associated with the word 'true.' There is little difficulty here. The most important rule for the use of the word 'true' (at least as applied to sentences) is surely: for any sentence '*p*,' '*p*' is true if and only if *p* (Tarski [1935] 1983, 159; 1969, 64).¹² Deflationism, as I understand it here, is the view that understanding the rules of this sort which govern the use of 'true' is all there is to

12. This formulation quantifies into a quote-name, which gives rise to certain well-known technical difficulties (Tarski [1935] 1983, 159-163). However, these difficulties do not prevent us from understanding and applying the rule in non-pathological cases. The philosophical issues in which we are here interested will be clearer if we stick with this simple, though admittedly technically defective, formulation.

understanding truth (cf. Burgess and Burgess 2011, 33-34). In the language of chapter 6, this would be to make truth a quasi-entity.

The Theory of Meanings combined a correspondence (realist) theory of truth with *semantic atomism* – the view that individual words are the fundamental bearers of meaning. A true sentence is one where things in the world are arranged in a way that corresponds to the arrangement of the words in the sentence. Thus, for instance, on Locke’s theory, the verbal proposition ‘Melampus is an animal’ corresponds to a certain mental proposition which is an act of joining the idea of Melampus with the abstract idea of animal. The idea of Melampus corresponds to Melampus, and the abstract idea of animal corresponds to any animal. The verbal proposition ‘Melampus is an animal’ and its corresponding mental proposition are true only if the thing in the world which is represented by the idea of Melampus is properly related to one of the things in the world which are represented by the idea of animal. In this case the relation is identity: Melampus is identical to one of the animals.

As was observed above, Berkeley could say something like this about the Melampus example, despite his elimination of mental propositions, by relating words directly to objects without going through ideas. Thus one might say, for instance, that on Berkeley’s view ‘Melampus is an animal’ is true because the extension of ‘Melampus’ (i.e. the singleton {Melampus}) is a subset of the extension of ‘animal’ (i.e. the set of all animals).¹³

We may assume for the sake of argument that this can be given a nominalistically acceptable paraphrase. Nevertheless, Berkeley cannot accept anything like this as a general account of truth, since it can handle only genuine referring expressions. Of

13. Although he discusses only the meaning of terms, and not whole sentences, Daniel Flage’s claim that Berkeley holds an ‘extensional theory of meaning’ strongly suggests that he would read Berkeley this way (Flage 1987, ch. 3).

course we can talk about the extension of a quasi-referring expression like ‘force,’ but since the quasi-entities in the extension have no language-independent existence, they do not seem to be able to do the work set out for them here.

Deflationism neatly solves this problem by absolving Berkeley of the need to find anything in common between all the truths. The rules governing ‘Melampus is an animal’ are of one sort, and different sorts of rules govern ‘force is proportional to the product of mass and acceleration,’ and still different sorts of rules govern ‘murder is wrong.’ On the deflationist proposal, all of these can be true sentences despite the fact that no relevant, substantive similarity between them can be found. In each case, we are prepared to assert the sentence, and ought therefore to be prepared to assert that the sentence is true, and that is all there is to say about the matter.

The main problem with a deflationist interpretation of Berkeley is that, unless somehow supplemented, it fails to secure any sort of objectivity in the discourse of ethics and revealed religion. Although Berkeley is willing to accept a kind of relativism or conventionalism about physics (DM, §67), he is surely unwilling to accept any such relativism about ethics or revealed religion. However, given that the rules of these domains of discourse are primarily volitional and affective, it is hard to see how, absent a substantive characterization of truth, there could be an objectively right set of objects of assent. This is, of course, the well-known problem of how deflationism can secure the intuitive claim that truth is a *norm* of belief and assertion (Wright 1992, 15-21; Price 1998). Why, one might well ask, should we assent to one sentence rather than another? This is a question a theory of truth should answer, but deflationism does not answer it. For this reason, I do not find it plausible to attribute an unadorned deflationism to Berkeley. A more substantive notion of truth is needed.

7.2.2 Berkeley and Pragmatism

Why believe one thing rather than another? At least in the realm of ethics and religion, there is an answer to this question which is both interpretively and philosophically attractive. Given that Berkeley ties assent so closely to *action*, it might be thought that assent is to be judged by the norms of *practical* rationality, that is, that we ought to regulate our assent in such a way as to achieve *beneficial outcomes*. This fits nicely with Berkeley's constant emphasis on the *usefulness* of the philosophical, religious, and moral doctrines he favors.

This kind of *pragmatist* or *instrumentalist* conception of truth has been attributed to Berkeley by a number of scholars. Unfortunately, most of these scholars have neglected to explain what they mean by 'pragmatism.'

Paul Olscamp characterizes Berkeley as holding that "the truth of a sentence . . . is a function of its effects when interpreted and followed as a rule or direction" (Olscamp 1970b, 45). Although this characterization is rather vague,¹⁴ its central idea fits well with the account of assent developed above: since assenting to a proposition just is having some set of dispositions, the conduit by which assent makes contact with the world would seem to be by the actualization of those dispositions, that is, by our taking certain actions pursuant to that proposition. It would seem that for the proposition to make contact with the world in the correct way is just for assent to that proposition to be *useful*, i.e. for the effects of actualizing the dispositions involved in the assent to be beneficial. The pragmatist interpretation of Berkeley attributes to him the view that usefulness is somehow *constitutive* of truth.

14. Olscamp admits as much, and says that this is unavoidable because there is "no body of statements in Berkeley's writings which can plausibly be taken to constitute a theory of truth" (Olscamp 1970b, 145). Olscamp is, of course, correct that Berkeley never addresses the issue directly. I think, however, that given Berkeley's account of *meaning* – something he *does* address directly – and his other commitments we can come to a rather less vague and schematic Berkeleian view about truth.

Claire Schwartz is another scholar who asserts that Berkeley adopts an “instrumentalist conception of truth” (C. Schwartz 2010, 46). However, it is not clear that she actually endorses the pragmatist interpretation as I have defined it, for her language is more often epistemic:

“what allows us to know whether a proposition is true or false is its utility”
(46)

“Berkeley implies that the utility is also what makes us recognize the truth of a physical proposition” (46)

“[The] utility [of mathematical propositions] . . . is the proof of their truth”
(54)

We must be careful to distinguish the metaphysical from the epistemological issue. What we are at present concerned with is the question of what *constitutes* the truth of a proposition, *not* what counts as evidence of its truth. As we shall see, Schwartz is correct that, for Berkeley the utility of a proposition counts toward its truth; however, her claim that Berkeley has an instrumentalist conception of truth strongly suggests that she holds that utility is *conclusive* proof of truth because truth is entirely constituted by utility.

It cannot be seriously maintained that Berkeley *identifies* truth with usefulness. The very structure of *Alciphron* speaks against such identification: dialogues 2 and 3 are concerned with the usefulness of natural religion, and 4 with its truth. Dialogue 5 is concerned with the usefulness of Christianity and 6 with its truth. The characters in the dialogue, on both sides of the dispute, explicitly and repeatedly recognize these as distinct questions (e.g. *Alc*, §§2.25, 6.1). Furthermore, there are explicit recognitions, again on both sides, that utility and truth can come apart:

CRITO. . . Errors and nonsense as such are of small concern in the eye of the public, which consider not the metaphysical truth of notions, so much as the tendency they have to produce good or evil ([Alc](#), §2.24)

EUPHRANOR. . . you should not, therefore, if you would appear consistent with yourself, think it necessary or wise to publish hurtful truths (§3.16).

ALCIPHON. . . all proofs drawn from utility or convenience are foreign to the purpose [of proving the existence of God]. They may prove indeed the usefulness of the notion, but not the existence of the thing. Whatever legislators or statesmen may think, truth and convenience are very different things to the rigorous eyes of a philosopher (§4.1).¹⁵

Finally, it is repeatedly emphasized in the early dialogues that “truth is constant and uniform” ([Alc](#), §1.15; cf. [Alc](#), §3.15), or, in Alciphron’s more emphatic statement, that truth is “of a stable, permanent, and uniform nature; not various and changeable like modes or fashions, and things depending on fancy” ([Alc](#), §1.8). However, as Alciphron points out, “a thing may be useful to one man’s views, and not to another’s” (§1.16).

Thus it is common ground, in *Alciphron*, between the freethinkers and the Christians, not only that utility and truth are conceptually distinct, but that they can come apart. This implies that usefulness is not even conclusive proof of truth. Admittedly, there are some texts in which Euphranor and Crito seem to suggest the contrary. The most emphatic is found in §2.6, where Crito says, “Can anything be more inconsistent, than to condemn in practice what is approved in speculation? Truth is one and the same; it being impossible a thing should be practically wrong, and speculatively right.” However, careful attention to these texts will show that they are all restricted to ‘practical’ truths. Thus Euphranor

15. Also see [An](#), §10.

asks rhetorically, “is not the general good of mankind to be regarded as a rule or measure of moral truths, of all such truths as direct or influence the moral actions of men?” (Alc, §1.16), and Crito says,

the one great mark of the truth of Christianity is . . . its tendency to do good, which seems the north star to conduct our judgment in moral matters, and in all things of a practic nature; moral or practical truths being ever connected with universal benefit (§5.4).

The conclusion, then is that truth and utility are distinct, but utility is *evidence* of truth, and that for explicitly practical claims, that is, claims about what we ought to do, it is *conclusive* evidence.

That truth is not to be identified with utility does not entail the falsity of the pragmatist interpretation, for truth may be constituted by utility in some more complicated fashion than simple identity. William James, a classical exemplar of pragmatism, strenuously objects to the characterization of pragmatism as “calling everything true which, if it were true, would be pleasant” (James 1907, 234). It is not sufficient for truth, according to classical pragmatism, that a belief should bring us a favorable balance of pleasure over pain. Rather, classical pragmatism, as enunciated by James, holds “that truth is *one species of good*” (75). More precisely:

ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience . . . Any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true so far forth, true instrumentally (58).

True beliefs, for James, are beliefs which are good for getting along in the world, beliefs we can successfully *do something* with. Beliefs that give us a warm, fuzzy feeling do not thereby get to be true. The ‘utility’ involved is not merely an optimal balance of pleasure over pain.

According to Robert Schwartz, this is precisely the sort of view Berkeley adopts. On this interpretation, although Berkeley accepts that there is a sense in which truth involves correspondence to reality, this ‘correspondence,’ in the end, involves only correlation between our ideas. The true sentences are those which “enable us to navigate our cognitive and behavioral environment successfully” (R. Schwartz [n.d.](#), 10).

Although the interpretation of Berkeley as a sophisticated pragmatist of this sort enjoys considerable textual and philosophical support, it does not open the gap between utility and truth wide enough to account for the textual data from *Alciphron*. The cases where Berkeley sees utility and truth coming apart are not just cases where the utility consists in the belief itself being pleasant. The case seems rather to be something like this. When it comes to truths about what we ought to do, there can be no separation of truth from utility, since believing that one ought to do something cannot be separated from being at least somewhat motivated to do it. Hence correct normative beliefs necessarily, though not infallibly, tend to produce correct actions, and are for this reason useful. However, all beliefs have *some* tendency to effect action, since beliefs consist in dispositions. Other beliefs, which are not explicitly normative, may be true, but nevertheless have a pernicious effect in action. Berkeley does not say when or how this happens, but the fact that the possibility is left open by the discussion in *Alciphron*, and that theism in general and Christianity in particular must, separately, be shown both useful and true, shows that Berkeley cannot hold a general theory of truth which joins truth to utility so closely as classical pragmatism does.

7.2.3 Berkeley and Carnap

Utility is, for Berkeley, not a guarantee of truth. Nevertheless he clearly takes utility as a reason for belief. Berkeley particularly emphasizes the utility of certain sign systems, such as Newtonian physics (Alc, §7.10). This might suggest the Carnapian thesis that we can make sense of truth only within a linguistic framework (sign system) and the choice between such frameworks is a pragmatic one (Carnap 1950). This is further supported by the holistic tendency of Berkeley's theory of quasi-entities: because forces (and, as I argued in chapter 6, bodies) exist only as artifacts of a particular sign system, the word 'force' cannot be assigned a meaning apart from that system. Since the word 'force' cannot be meaningful apart from the system, surely no sentence containing 'force' can be true apart from the system.

It is in fact somewhat difficult to arrive at an understanding of Carnap's claim which does not make it trivial. It is certainly true that if one makes a sound, or draws a series of symbols, then whether what one says or writes is true depends on what language one is speaking or writing. It is further true that, for any false sentence of English, it is possible to speak a language in which that string of sounds or characters expresses a truth. Thus one may very well speak a language in which 'twice two is equal to seven' means that snow is white, and in that case when one uttered 'twice two is equal to seven' what one said would be true (cf. PHK, §79). Finally, it is surely correct that decisions about whether to make linguistic reforms are (often, if not always) to be made on pragmatic grounds.

These obvious facts, however, answer none of our questions about truth. All that this tells us is that whether a given sentence is true depends on what it means, and what it means depends on the conventions of the language being spoken. We have made no progress on the question of how language makes contact with the world.

Matti Eklund has defended the claim that these obvious points are all that Carnap has in mind in his distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ questions (Eklund 2009). However, Carnap is often taken to be proposing something more radical. According to Scott Soames, Carnap’s central claims are two: first, that analytic sentences are true (or false) only by the conventions of a particular linguistic framework and hence make no claims about the world, and, second, that many ontological claims, such as ‘there are numbers,’ are analytic (Soames 2009, 428-435). Thus Carnap holds that we must simply decide whether to speak a language in which Platonism is trivially true or a language in which it is trivially false by adopting the relevant convention regarding the truth or falsity of ‘there are numbers’ and related sentences. There is no substantive fact under dispute, only the question of which language we ought to speak, and that is a practical question.

This view does have something to say about our present question for, as mentioned above (p. 196), on this view the conventions which make certain sentences *assertable* would be sufficient to make them *true*. Thus the conventions governing ‘force’ would guarantee that ‘there are forces’ (or, at least, ‘where there are accelerations, there are forces’) is true. On Berkeley’s theory of quasi-entities, this much is clearly correct. Furthermore, Carnap is quite explicit that “the introduction of the new ways of speaking [e.g. talk of abstract objects] does not need any theoretical justification because it does not imply any assertion of reality” (Carnap 1950, §3). This is in line with the anti-Quinean meta-ontology I attributed to Berkeley in chapter 6: quasi-entities exist, not as a matter of objective, metaphysical fact, but simply because we have introduced quasi-referring expressions into our language. The claim that such objects exist gets to be true in virtue of the introduction of conventions authorizing its assertion; no cooperation from the world is required.

Carnap's aim in introducing his notion of linguistic frameworks, and the distinction between 'theoretical' framework-internal questions and 'pragmatic' framework-external questions, was to trivialize metaphysical disputes such as the dispute between nominalists and Platonists. It was part of the positivist program of the elimination of metaphysics. Now, Berkeley can actually be seen as having some degree of sympathy with this program. For instance, in his notebooks he reminds himself "To be eternally banishing Metaphysics & recalling Men to Common Sense" (N, §751). However, Berkeley's contrast between 'metaphysics' and 'commonsense' is certainly not the same as Carnap's distinction between 'metaphysics' and 'science.' By Carnap's lights, Berkeley is surely to be classed as a metaphysician and, what is worse, a theologian.¹⁶

In "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," Carnap seems to want to deflate all ontological questions. This would seem to suggest that Carnap's anti-metaphysical position is that *all* entities are (in our terms) mere quasi-entities. However, it is not clear that this extreme doctrine is tenable, or consistently held by Carnap. When Carnap talks about the decision to adopt the 'thing language,' he treats this as a question of whether to add talk of 'things' to a pre-existing "language of sense data and other 'phenomenal' entities" (Carnap 1950, §2); the 'erlebs' which were the fundamental entities in Carnap's *Aufbau* were of this sort.¹⁷ Furthermore, he describes the pragmatic question of whether to adopt a certain linguistic framework as the question, "Are our experiences such that the use of the linguistic forms in question will be expedient and fruitful?" (§2). Carnap thus seems to recognize the existence of phenomenal experience as prior to our decision

16. A. J. Ayer, rather oddly, denies that it is "fair to regard Berkeley as a metaphysician," and then goes on to complain about Berkeley's understanding of God and the self (Ayer 1952, 53-54). These very doctrines clearly show that, despite certain similarities, Berkeley is not an anti-metaphysical thinker in anything like the way the positivists were.

17. For a brief, but rigorous, critical exposition of Carnap's system in the *Aufbau*, see Goodman 1977, ch. 5. 'Erleb' is Goodman's abbreviation for Carnap's German neologism, 'elementarerlebnisse' (112).

of which linguistic frameworks to adopt. This appears to commit him to holding that sense data, and sense data alone, are (in our terms) genuine entities. If this is his view, then he was perhaps not so anti-metaphysical as he intended to be (see Carnap 1950, §4).

Leaving aside the question of whether Carnap succeeds in his anti-metaphysical pretensions, let us return to the question of truth. Carnap's view is that some sentences (the analytic truths) are true by convention alone, whereas others (the synthetic truths) are true due to a combination of convention with experience. The conventions of language authorize the assertion of analytic truths regardless of what the experienced world is like; by contrast they authorize the assertion of synthetic sentences only if the experienced world is a certain way. That the assertion is duly authorized (warranted) is sufficient for its truth.

Carnap's general approach is easily severed from his verificationism. All that is needed is to give a different account of the circumstances in which the assertion of synthetic sentences is authorized. These circumstances will, of course, be different for different sentences. However, when this separation is combined with Berkeley's Internalist Requirement (above, §5.2), difficulties emerge. The Internalist Requirement is what prevented us from having a linguistic rule like *say 'there is a table here' only in the presence of mind-independent, material tables* (ch. 6). The application conditions of the linguistic rules we follow must be accessible to us prior to learning the rule. However, we cannot follow the rule *say 'there are other minds' only if there are other minds*, because our ability to think about other minds depends on our ability to generalize from our own experience, and generalization is only possible by means of language (see above, §6.5). We cannot recognize the presence of other minds in a way that is independent of language, yet other minds are not mere quasi-entities; 'there are other

minds' is not analytic. Thus the conditions in which the assertion of 'there are other minds' is warranted must come apart from the conditions in which it is true.

Furthermore, if we *did* allow externalistic rules for assertion, we would no longer have a distinctive theory of truth, for at that point we might as well say that the rule is *assert a sentence only if it is true*. It is the internalistic nature of the rules of assertion that make this a distinctive conception of truth.

Additionally, Berkeley does not seem to distinguish 'pragmatic' and 'theoretical' questions so sharply as Carnap does. As we have seen, although *Alciphron* distinguishes the question of usefulness from the question of truth, both together are taken to be relevant to the question of whether to endorse Christianity (see especially [Alc](#), §7.32). Now, either Christianity counts as a linguistic framework or not. If it does then the question whether to endorse Christianity is an external question, and thus, on Carnap's view, only the pragmatic considerations ought to count; if Christianity does not count as a linguistic framework, then this is an internal question and only the evidential considerations ought to count. But for Berkeley both kinds of considerations matter. Carnap does admit that decisions about accepting linguistic frameworks, "although . . . not of a cognitive nature, will nevertheless be influenced by theoretical knowledge" (Carnap 1950, §2), but the role of theoretical knowledge here is only to help us determine what will be useful.

Finally, Carnap's whole aim is to defend a sort of pluralism or relativism according to which there is no question of one language being better than another in any terms other than practical utility. Although Berkeley does make a move of this sort with respect to the dispute between Newton and Torricelli about the nature of force ([DM](#), §67), he does not want to take this kind of approach across the board. According to Berkeley, the ontologies of the materialist and the atheist are not only pernicious but also factually

false. The materialist does not merely adopt an alternative set of conventions; she misdescribes the world. If Berkeley is to preserve this claim, he must adopt an account of truth which takes ‘fit with objective reality’ more seriously.

Berkeley has real affinities with Carnap. He holds, for instance, that we may introduce new entities simply by adopting conventions for the use of certain words, without committing ourselves to the language-independent existence of those entities. He holds that more than one system of such entities is possible, and that we ought to adopt whichever such system proves most useful. Furthermore, he holds that once such a system exists, we may state truths within it, despite the fact that the entities these truths appear to be about have no existence or nature independent of the system (see above, §6.2). Nevertheless, the Carnapian theory simply does not capture all of Berkeley’s commitments. Berkeley was a metaphysician and, as such, was in need of a more robust, objective conception of truth.

7.2.4 Realism about Truth, Holism about Meaning

Each of the theories of truth we have so far discussed captures an aspect of Berkeley’s thought, but none of them can be Berkeley’s ultimate position. Berkeley needs to be able to account for the meaning of the word ‘true’ within his use theory, and surely the disquotation schema will play a large role in that account, as on the deflationist theory, but Berkeley is in need of a more ‘inflated’ account of truth than this. Berkeley sees a strong connection between utility and truth, yet also leaves a gap between them which is wider than that allowed by classical pragmatism. Finally, Berkeley recognizes that different sign systems, involving different quasi-entities, are possible, and that the statements within each of these systems may be true. He further holds that we should choose

among these sign systems on a pragmatic basis. Yet Berkeley intermingles considerations of utility and considerations of truth far more thoroughly than Carnap does, and he wants more objectivity than Carnap allows. What kind of theory of truth can we then attribute to Berkeley?

To begin to answer this question, let us return to Berkeley's discussion of 'speaking with the vulgar.' In the passage already quoted, Berkeley tells us that "[i]n 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" (PHK, §52). Note that Berkeley speaks of *how* false the 'phrases' are, implying that *falsity comes in degrees*. It might be thought that this is merely rhetorical. However, Berkeley goes on to say that "propriety being regulated by custom, language is suited to the received opinions, which are not always the *truest*" (§52, emphasis added). Philosophers may, to some small degree "alter the bent and genius of the tongue we speak," but some "inaccurate modes of speech" will always remain, because we can only incrementally alter the language we have received from custom. Thus the phrases used, even in Berkeley's own works, are *to some degree* false or inaccurate, but if we consider "the scope and tenor and connexion" of the work, we will be able to "collect the sense" Berkeley intends (§52).

This is not the only place Berkeley speaks of degrees of truth and falsity.¹⁸ In response to Alciphron's insistence that Pagan religion brought about virtue in the Greco-Roman world, Crito says: "we [Christians] freely own [that Pagan religions] produced good effects on some people: but then these good effects were owing to truths contained in those false religions: the truer, therefore, the more useful" (Alc, §5.10). Here the total religious system of Greco-Roman Paganism is first described as false, but then admitted

18. Cf. also NTV, §90: "this account [of the inverted retinal image] to me does not seem in any degree true."

to be true to some degree (though, Crito insists, to a much lesser degree than Christianity), insofar as it *contains* individual truths. Similarly, back in the *Principles*, plain language contains falsehoods. Berkeley compares this to the way in which ordinary modes of speech assume heliocentrism, and argues that just as Copernicanism can be adopted without disturbing these modes of speech, so immaterialism can be adopted while still speaking, for instance, of physical causation. What is necessary is a *reinterpretation* of these modes of speech.

As I mentioned above, P. J. E. Kail finds evidence of a form of fictionalism here (Kail 2010, 33-36). Kail takes Berkeley's discussion of Copernicanism as evidence that Berkeley endorses a form of revolutionary fictionalism – that is, that Berkeley is arguing that we ought to *change* how we use language, and *begin* to regard talk of physical causation as a fiction.

I argued above that this text does not provide adequate support for the attribution of fictionalism to Berkeley, since Berkeley seems to hold that these 'inaccurate expressions' are true *when correctly interpreted*. Nevertheless, there is a degree of truth (!) in Kail's proposal. Most importantly: Berkeley *is* proposing linguistic reform. What he is *not* doing is suggesting that these claims, as ordinarily interpreted in plain language, are entirely false, and that the linguistic reform we should implement is to regard them as mere figures of speech. What he is suggesting instead is that by taking a holistic approach (attending to "the scope and tenor and connexion of a discourse") we can come to recognize the intermixture of truth and falsehood in our ordinary ways of speaking and, by incremental reform, come to speak more truly.

The incremental nature of this process is even more explicit in the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*:

The work of science and speculation is to unravel our prejudices and mistakes, untwisting the closest connexions, distinguishing things that are different, instead of confused and perplexed, giving us distinct views, gradually correcting our judgment, and reducing it to a philosophical exactness. And, as this is the work of time, and done by degrees, it is extremely difficult, if at all possible, to escape the snares of popular language, and the being betrayed thereby to say things strictly speaking neither true nor consistent . . . For, language being accommodated to the prænotions of men and use of life, it is difficult to express therein the precise truth of things, which is so distant from their use, and so contrary to our prænotions (TVV, §35; cf. [Siris](#), §296).

One consequence of this approach is that when Crito admits that Pagan religion contained some useful truths, he need not be taken as claiming that there are a few individual sentences to which Pagans assented which were true, while the majority of their sentences were false. Rather, it may well be that *one and the same sentence* contains both truth and falsehood, and it may perhaps be the case that it is not until *after* some linguistic reform that we are in a position to untangle the truth from the falsehood.

To see how this works, let us consider three cases, one historical case, and two thought experiments from recent philosophical literature.

Phlogiston. Joseph Priestley hypothesized the existence of a substance called ‘phlogiston’ which was released in combustion. He was thus inclined to assert ‘phlogiston is being released’ whenever combustion was going on. As it turns out, there is no such thing as phlogiston.

Bligers. When the first settlers arrived in the hitherto unpeopled land of Pluralia, they observed (always from a fair distance) what appeared to be

black tigers, and they coined the name ‘bliger’ for them . . . Occasionally, Pluralians would make idle remarks along the lines of ‘There’s a bliger crossing the field’, and that was the extent of their interaction with bligers. A few centuries after the settlement of Pluralia, however, a foreign zoological expedition discovered that, in a way, there were no bligers. “A bliger (*Quasi-Tigris Multiplex Pluralianus*),” their report read, “is really six animals. Its ‘legs’ are four monkey-like creatures, its ‘trunk’ a sort of sloth, and its ‘head’ a species of owl. Any six animals of the proper species can combine temporarily to form a bliger” (Van Inwagen 1990, 104).

Spirits. Imagine a girl who has inherited a primitive conception of person from her linguistic community. Say that she takes persons, including herself, to be spirits, and that she takes spirits to be parcels of a subtle and ethereal fluid that permeates bodies. What is the content of her assertion “I am in pain” made after a visit to the local medicine man? (Gupta 2006, 140)

What these three cases have in common is that the assertion in question is reliably correlated with some real fact about the world. Priestley asserts ‘phlogiston is being released’ only when combustion is going on; the Pluralians asserts ‘a bliger is crossing the field’ only when six animals of certain species are crossing the field in a certain arrangement; and the girl in **Spirits** asserts ‘I am in pain’ only when she is in pain. Yet in each case a false presupposition about the world is so deeply embedded among the speaker community that it may plausibly be regarded as part of the meaning of the assertion (cf. our previous remarks about ‘phlogiston,’ p. 197). Furthermore, in a case like **Spirits** it may be impossible, prior to linguistic reform, to express the truth contained within the sentence without presupposing the falsehood. We can say, in our

actual language, “you are indeed in pain, but there is no such thing as a subtle, ethereal fluid,” but the girl in the story may not have the linguistic apparatus to say that she is in pain in a way that does not presuppose the existence of subtle, ethereal fluids.

Berkeley’s claim in [PHK](#), §52 is that *all human language* is like this to a greater or lesser degree. We cannot entirely escape from our linguistic inheritance to express absolute truth, entirely untainted by falsehood. As Berkeley puts it in a similar passage in the *New Theory of Vision*, “language being accommodated to the common notions and prejudices of men, it is scarce possible to deliver the naked and precise truth without great circumlocution, impropriety, and (to an unwary reader) seeming contradictions” ([NTV](#), §120).

What should we say about these cases? Do the speakers in our three stories speak the truth? According to Anil Gupta “it [is] best not to give a straight answer to these questions” (Gupta [2006](#), 140). Berkeley agrees. These assertions are not true or false *simpliciter*, but rather to some degree true and to some degree false.

As I have said, Berkeley does not think that we can free ourselves from falsehood entirely, but he does think that we can make incremental progress by linguistic and conceptual reform. His discussion of causation – the context of the remark we have been explicating – is instructive here. Berkeley’s claim is that the sentence ‘fire heats’ ([PHK](#), §51) is false to a high degree “if taken in a strict and speculative sense,” but may be retained insofar as it is associated with dispositions to feeling and action “necessary for our well-being” (§52). The key truth in the claim that fire heats is that *a good way to make something hot is to put it near a fire*. Assent to the sentence ‘fire heats’ does involve a disposition to follow this piece of advice. This useful part of the belief is unaffected when ‘fire heats’ is reinterpreted as the claim that fire *signifies* heat in the language of nature (see below, §8.4) and thereby freed from the pernicious half-belief in

matter with which it is now connected (see above, §7.1). Contrary to Kail, this does not involve regarding ‘fire heats’ as literally false and continuing to use it in some non-literal sense (e.g. using it to mean: ‘according to the fiction of physical causation, fire heats’). Instead, it involves recognizing that ‘fire heats,’ interpreted literally, contains a degree of truth and a degree of falsity and then *adjusting* the literal meaning of the phrase to get more truth and less falsity.

As we have observed, it is not always possible, prior to linguistic reform, to state separately the truth and the falsehood contained in a partially true statement. This is why Berkeley insists that a holistic approach must be taken. Not all of the needed linguistic reforms can be recommended explicitly by stating the new rules in our existing language. Thus Berkeley must *model* the new language he is recommending. We must pay attention to the whole of Berkeley’s writings, and begin speaking and thinking in his language, before we can understand what he is after.

Of course, Berkeley tries, as best he can, to help us along the way by making explicit remarks about the meanings and various ambiguities of key words like ‘exist.’ What he tells us in [PHK](#), §52, though, is that it is not possible for him to do this so thoroughly “as never to give a handle for cavillers to pretend difficulties and inconsistencies.” For the girl in **Spirits**, to say ‘you are indeed in pain, but there are no subtle, ethereal fluids’ is to assert a contradiction. Yet how can we bring about the needed linguistic reform except to begin asserting what is now a contradiction? It is by this very change in our linguistic practice that we sever mental language from commitment to subtle ethereal fluids. Indeed, to use an example discussed by Berkeley, van Inwagen, and Gupta, we are still inclined to say such things as ‘it was cooler in the garden after the sun had moved behind the elms’ (Van Inwagen 1990, 101; cf. [PHK](#), §51; Gupta 2006, 140), though we may now go on to say ‘of course the sun didn’t really move at all; the earth

did.’ If Copernicus or Galileo had said one of these things right after the other, he would have contradicted himself. But asserting such a contradiction, and thereby *forcing* reinterpretation of old patterns of speech, is a way of introducing reform. By continuing to insist that fire heats, and that the fire is the *physical* cause of (e.g.) the boiling of the water while at the same time denying that fire could possibly be the *efficient* cause of anything, Berkeley forces reinterpretation of our ordinary talk about causation in the physical world. In this case, Berkeley is, of course, able to give some account of what physical causation amounts to, and so to say quite a bit about the reform he is advocating (again, see §8.4, below), but his concern in PHK, §52 is that he cannot possibly say enough about this sort of reform to avoid all “difficulties and inconsistencies.” Thus it is primarily by personally adopting this new way of speaking that Berkeley pushes his reformist agenda.

We are now in a position to give a rough intuitive characterization of what I take to be Berkeley’s understanding of truth. A large collection of sentences which embody a certain set of linguistic rules (including rules for non-linguistic actions) can together constitute a sort of *portrait* of the world, and as a portrait can be a more or less accurate likeness of its subject, so such a collection of sentences can, as a whole, be more or less true. To attribute truth or falsity to an individual sentence is like saying that one brush stroke is a good or poor likeness of some aspect of the subject. This may be a perfectly sensible thing to say in the context of the portrait as a whole; on the other hand, the single brush stroke, by itself, does not represent or portray anything at all. It is the context of the portrait that makes the brush stroke a representation.

This general approach to truth can be captured by the slogan: ‘realism about truth, holism about meaning.’ Berkeley is a realist about truth insofar as he holds that truth does involve some sort of genuine matching or correspondence between what we say

and how the world is. He is a holist about meaning insofar as he holds that the match or mismatch is primarily between a total way of speaking and the world, and only derivatively between individual sentences and the world. Indeed, I will go on to argue that, due to the strong pragmatic elements in Berkeley's understanding of meaning and truth, it is in fact more accurate to say that Berkeley's theory of truth involves a matching between a *form of life* and the world.¹⁹ This kind of matching comes in degrees, and sentences inherit a degree of match or mismatch from the form of life in which they are embedded.

This account is, as I said, rough and intuitive. Furthermore, the previous two paragraphs have glossed over the most difficult question for a theory of truth, namely, in what this matching with the world consists. Additionally, the only reason I have so far given for attributing this theory to Berkeley is that it makes good sense of one particular difficult text, [PHK](#), §52. In order to put some flesh on the bones of this theory, and to defend its attribution to Berkeley more fully, I now proceed to show that, in combination with the account of assent I attributed to Berkeley in §7.1, it can account for those aspects of Berkeley's thought which rendered each of the three interpretations dismissed above initially attractive, and that it does not share their faults.

19. I use this Wittgensteinian phrase intentionally. The 'holist' aspect of my interpretation, as applied to Christianity, sees Berkeley as anticipating Wittgensteinian approaches to philosophy of religion. See, e.g., Phillips 1966, (1970) 1993. The relationship of the 'realist' aspect to Wittgenstein and his followers is more complex. D. Z. Phillips takes himself to be following Wittgenstein in holding that the debate between realists and anti-realists is fundamentally confused (Phillips [1991] 1993). On the other hand, Iakovos Vasiliou takes Wittgenstein to endorse a thesis Vasiliou calls 'the factuality of religious belief' (Vasiliou 2001, 30-31), which certainly sounds like a realist thesis, though it is not clear how this is to be reconciled with Vasiliou's uncertainty about whether Wittgenstein endorsed a form of relativism (47-48). At the opposite extreme from Vasiliou, several scholars take Wittgenstein to endorse a more or less straightforward form of anti-realism (see, e.g., Bailey 2001; Nielsen 2001; Arrington 2001). This is obviously not the place for extended interpretation of Wittgenstein and his followers. I have said this much only to indicate that there is one relatively clear element of the Wittgensteinian point of view which, on my interpretation, Berkeley anticipates, and this is the view that religious propositions (or at least propositions pertaining to religious mysteries) are intelligible only within the context of the religious form of life in which they have their use. Beyond this, I take no position on the interpretation of Wittgenstein, and therefore can take no position on the extent to which Berkeley's views are similar to Wittgenstein's.

The attribution of a deflationist account of truth to Berkeley was suggested by Berkeley's use theory of meaning, but was found unable to secure the degree of objectivity Berkeley wants. On the theory of truth under consideration, the disquotational schema turns out *not* to be the most important rule for the use of 'true.' This is because the all-or-nothing attribution of truth to sentences is not the most basic use of 'true.' Rather, a Christian, immaterialist form of life is true to a large degree, while a freethinking, materialist form of life is false to a large degree. *Within* such a form of life, sentences can be evaluated as true or false. However, the truth of (e.g.) the doctrine of the Trinity is not a matter of its being true *according to* Christianity. It is rather a matter of Trinitarian modes of speech making a positive contribution to the truth of Christianity. 'The Son is of one substance with the Father' is one of the good brush strokes, which makes the portrait a good likeness.

Strictly speaking, Christianity, immaterialism, freethinking, and the like are not themselves forms of life (Phillips 1986, 79), but can be significant aspects of a form of life, with widespread consequences. The reason we do not talk as though it is an entire form of life we are evaluating for truth is that, if the form of life in question were totally alien compared to our own, we would be unable to engage in any evaluation in the first place. What we *can* do is consider forms of life which are possible revisions of our own form of life. Thus Alciphron can consider the form of life he would live if he became a Christian, and Euphranor can consider the form of life that he would live if he became a freethinker, and these can be evaluated as true or false to some degree. This is what one is doing when one says such things as 'Christianity is true:' one is comparing the Christian forms of life one might adopt with the non-Christian forms of life one might adopt.

Since these sorts of evaluations are the fundamental ones in Berkeley's understanding of truth, we need to begin by understanding the rules for these evaluations. First, there is a disquotation-like rule. It is disingenuous to attribute truth to a form of life which one does not adopt. To believe in Christianity is to have a complex set of dispositions to thought, speech, feeling, and action, all of which, according to Berkeley, center around "the love of God and man" (Alc, §5.15). So the disquotation-like principle for this use of 'true' is that the attribution of truth to a form of life is correct if and only if the adoption of that form of life is correct.

This rule is disquotation-like in the following way. According to the disquotation rule, it is a linguistic mistake to assert "'p' is true" when one is not prepared to assert 'p.' Christianity, or immaterialism, or Marxism, or any form of life one chooses, is constituted by linguistic and non-linguistic behavior. Thus the Christian is committed, on the one hand, to asserting 'God exists' and, on the other hand, to refraining from swindling the poor. To assert 'Christianity is true' when one is unprepared to assert 'God exists' or to refrain from swindling the poor is to make a mistake. It is to contradict oneself. Now, of course, people *do* contradict themselves, and that with some frequency. The claim is not that to assert 'Christianity is true' and fail consistently to adopt Christianity as a form of life is *impossible*; the claim is, rather, that to do this is to commit an error, an error akin to asserting "'p' is true" while being unprepared to assert 'p.' This is because to say that Christianity is true is to evaluate it as worthy of adoption, just as to say "'p' is true" is to evaluate 'p' as worthy of assertion.

The correctness of adopting a form of life is not an all or nothing matter. Whether to adopt a form of life is a practical question and, as a result, practical utility must surely be one of the factors to be weighed. But practical utility clearly comes in degrees.²⁰ So,

20. For the same reason, William James also sometimes speaks of truth as coming in degrees (James 1907, 63-64).

to put matters more correctly, a form of life is true to the degree that it is worthy of our adoption, and the belief that a form of life is worthy of adoption is constituted in part by an inclination to adopt it.²¹

This disquotation-like rule cannot be all there is to the truth of a form of life. If we are to have the kind of substantive conception of truth which I have argued Berkeley needs, then we need to say something about what makes a form of life worthy of adoption. We have already indicated that utility plays a role here but since, as I argued in §7.2.2, Berkeley permits a wider gap between utility and truth than classical pragmatism, utility cannot be the only desideratum.

The text where Berkeley comes closest to addressing our present question – what makes a form of life worthy of adoption? – directly is in Crito’s speech on how we ought to choose among religions. Crito says:

one of more spirit and a juster way of thinking [than the freethinkers], makes [the plurality of religions] a step whence he looks about, and proceeds to examine, and compare the differing institutions of religion. He will observe, which of these is the most sublime and rational in its doctrines, most venerable in its mysteries, most useful in its precepts, most decent in its worship? Which creates the noblest hopes, and most worthy views? He will consider their rise and progress: which owes least to human arts or arms? Which flatters the senses and gross inclinations of men? Which adorns and improves the most excellent part of our nature? Which has been propagated in the most wonderful manner? Which has surmounted the greatest difficulties or

21. This does not imply the Socratic thesis that we are always inclined to adopt a form of life just to the degree that we judge it worthy of adoption, for we may have other inclinations besides those which help to constitute our evaluations. Furthermore, Berkeley likely holds the libertarian thesis that we are able to act contrary to our inclinations. Each of these considerations is individually sufficient to preserve the possibility of *akrasia*.

showed the most disinterested zeal and sincerity in its professors? He will inquire, which best accords with nature and history? He will consider, what savours of the world, and what looks like wisdom from above? ([Alc](#), §7.33).

The criteria identified by Crito can be reduced to five general headings. We ought, according to Crito, to adopt a religion which: (1) exhibits evidence of supernatural origin; (2) has doctrines which can be rationally believed; (3) has practices which can rationally and morally be followed; (4) produces useful emotions; and (5) exhibits positive effects on human character.

The last three of these are pragmatic in nature: based on what we already know or believe, we must evaluate whether the form of life in question will be useful to us. This includes the question of what the rules therein actually tell us to do, as well as the likely effects of any emotions that way of life would tend to make us feel. We can confirm the helpful or harmful effects of adopting a form of life by observation of those who have adopted it.

The first two criteria, on the other hand, do not appear to be pragmatic. Here we are told to look for evidence that the doctrines of the contemplated religion are true. This includes examining both evidence that bears directly on their truth and evidence that bears on the question of whether they are actually revealed by God.²² (If they are revealed by God, then they must of course be true.) What this means is that even though these individual sentences cannot be evaluated for truth apart from the form of life in which they are embedded, we must be able to evaluate them for truth without first adopting the form of life. We must be able to ask, counterfactually, if I adopted Christianity, would I go around saying a lot of false things?²³ Here it is important to

22. On the question of how these two types of evidence fit together, see Pearce, [forthcoming\(a\)](#).

23. This is in agreement with Kai Nielsen: “to understand religious discourse one must have a participant’s understanding of it. However, this certainly does not entail that one is actually a participant, that

remember that being *true within the context of Christianity* is not the same as being *true according to Christianity*. Obviously, the religious utterances of Christians are, for the most part, true according to Christianity,²⁴ but this is not the question Crito recommends that we ask. He recommends that we ask whether these things would be true in the context in which they would be uttered, namely, the context of a Christian form of life.

This brings us, then, to the question of the attribution of truth to individual sentences. Here the disquotation schema applies, though again it must be modified to accommodate Berkeley's recognition of degrees of truth. Thus we can say²⁵ that for any sentence *p*, '*p* is true' exhibits the same degree of truth or falsity as *p*. This, however, does not get us very far toward an account of truth: it only tells us when, and to what degree, truth is properly attributed to sentences which themselves attribute truth to other sentences, where an independent evaluation of the degree of truth of those other sentences is possible. Again, a more substantive conception is needed.

one *accepts or believes* in the religion in question ... [thus] philosophy [can] relevantly criticise religions or forms of life" (Nielsen 1967, 193). Nielsen frames this claim as a criticism of the Wittgensteinian tradition in philosophy of religion, but D. Z. Phillips has vigorously disputed the notion that Wittgensteinianism was ever committed to the kind of fideism Nielsen attempts to foist on it (Phillips 1986, ch. 1; 2003).

24. Or perhaps not; many churches are characterized by shocking levels of theological ignorance. There is an interesting theoretical question here about the relationship between *Christian beliefs* and *the beliefs of Christians*. Could it be the case that there is some Christian belief which is not believed by most Christians (e.g., because only sophisticated theologians understand it)? There is a strong populist tendency in Berkeley's religious thought, which would no doubt incline him to answer 'no' (N, §405; Alc, §7.13; TVV, §6; see Pearce, forthcoming[b], §4); on the other hand, although Berkeley criticizes Roman Catholicism for demanding excessive deference to the clergy, he does believe in a special role for the clergy as authoritative teachers of religious doctrine: "I grant it is meet the Law of Christ should like other laws have magistrates [i.e., the clergy] to explain and apply it" (CGB, 425). In any event, someone who adopted Christianity after undertaking the kind of thorough investigation recommended by Crito would certainly then go around saying things which are true according to Christianity.

25. Subject to the caveats about quantifying into quote-names mentioned above (p. 293, note 12).

To make progress toward such a substantive conception, recall that, on Berkeley's view, sentences provide rules of thought, feeling, speech, and action. What we need is to identify a sense in which such rules can be said to match the world or not.

There is an obvious sort of match or mismatch which can be attributed to certain sentences containing genuine referring expressions. Thus consider the sentence 'all circles are red.' One of the instructions this gives us is, when imagining a circle, to imagine it as red. Thus if we are trying to imagine what a situation we might get ourselves into would be like, we will imagine that any circles in that situation will be red. This will result in a feeling of disappointed expectations in case we should find a non-red circle. These sorts of cases are the fundamental ones in terms of the contact we make with the world.

Thus far, Berkeley will sound like a verificationist. However, we should recall that on Berkeley's view there will be sentences of this sort which are in principle unverifiable *by me*. Such sentences include 'other minds exist' and 'there is shame not felt by me' (see below, §8.6). These contain only genuine referring expressions, that is, the words in these sentences are used as labels; however, I cannot personally get into a position to label those things directly.

Adapting a term from Quine, let us call atomic sentences containing no categorical terms other than genuine referring expressions 'observation sentences' (Quine 1960). Although such sentences cannot, even in principle, always be connected to observation *by me*, they can always in principle be connected quite directly to observation *by someone*.²⁶ The truth or falsity of observation sentences is partly constituted by the

26. This connection will not necessarily involve the possibility of absolute verification or falsification; for instance no one (other than God) can falsify 'there is shame [felt by someone]' or verify 'there is no shame [felt by anyone].'

simple referential function of those expressions, and this is as independent of the broader framework in which they would be embedded as one could like.

This referential ‘matching’ is, however, only one contributor to the truth or falsity of observation sentences. As we have discussed (§5.4), these sentences will be connected, within a framework, with inference rules, whereby we can get from one sentence to another. If the rules associated with the words in the sentences allow us to infer falsehoods from them, then the sentences in question will have a degree of falsity themselves. Furthermore, the sentences may have emotional or pragmatic associations, which can constitute part of their meaning, which give bad instructions for getting around in the world. For instance, one can imagine a word, call it ‘bircle,’ which is a genuine referring expression picking out blue visual circles, but has a strong negative emotional valence. It may be that all of the other observation sentences entailed by the ‘bircle’ sentences are true. Nevertheless, ‘there is a bircle’ will be in some degree false if the blue visual circle in question is a blueberry and the emotional association in question prevents me from eating it. To take a real-world case: the same sort of falsity would be exhibited by a sentence which used a racial slur to make a true descriptive statement about the members of the race in question. Since we have neutral racial labels in our language, we can separate the true from the false in such a sentence by saying, e.g., ‘it is true that many Irish-Americans have red hair, but there is no need to call them names.’ However, one can imagine a language in which the only label for a particular group was the negatively valenced one. There might be a language in which ‘he’s an Irish-American, but he’s not a bad person’ was a contradiction. The best way to change this state of affairs might very well be to go around asserting such contradictions, thereby forcing reinterpretation, as discussed above. Indeed, things like this seem to happen with some frequency, and this is the reason that the preferred labels for negatively stereotyped groups change so often:

the negative stereotypes about the group tend over time to get built in to the meaning of the label for that group. Thus, for instance, at some point in the history of English ‘she’s dumb but not stupid’ became a contradiction (it hadn’t been one before), and this unfortunate state of affairs was corrected by the introduction of a new word, ‘mute,’ for people who can’t speak.²⁷

Observation sentences are the simplest case, and we can see that even here things are quite complicated. My key point at present is that even for observation sentences, there is a very strong holism about meaning, and there are significant pragmatic elements of meaning. Where genuine reference is absent – which is to say, in most of our language – the emotional, practical, and inferential connections are all there is to the truth or falsity of a sentence, and since sentences have a variety of such conventional connections, they will be likely to contain a mixture of truth and falsity. As Quine said, the ‘fabric’ of our language “impinges on experience only along the edges” (Quine 1951, 39), yet it is in terms of these edges that the whole fabric must be evaluated. Berkeley endorses a stronger pragmatism than Quine or Carnap (though weaker than James); for him feeling and action are as much a part of the interface between the linguistic fabric and the world as observation. This is why I have said that Berkeley is a more radical holist even than Quine: the ‘whole’ relative to which the individual statements must be evaluated includes feeling and action. It is a form of life and not just a theory.

We return now to our question of the conditions under which we ought to adopt a form of life. We have said that we ought to consider evidence of the usefulness of that form of life as a whole, but also evidence of the truth of the individual sentences to which we would assent were we to adopt it. We have now seen that the truth of some individual sentences (namely, the observation sentences) does *include* a straightforward

27. Objection: This whole discussion runs roughshod over the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Reply: Berkeley doesn’t have that distinction.

sort of piece-by-piece correspondence, but, even in this case, this correspondence is not the whole story. We must ask, in the context of the form of life in which it is embedded, does assent to this sentence lead to assent to other sentences which are false (to a high degree)? We must also ask, does assent to this sentence (in that context) lead to helpful or unhelpful emotions and actions?

Many of the historical claims involved in Christianity (and Crito explicitly mentions history) do imply observation sentences about past occurrences: Christianity claims that certain people saw and heard certain things. Furthermore, there are claims about what people will experience in the future (the heavenly reward). In these cases there is a question of descriptive adequacy.²⁸ However, there are also, in Christianity, specific practical instructions. Furthermore, words and phrases have certain emotional associations (the widespread adoption of Christianity, for instance, radically altered the emotional associations of the word ‘cross’ and its equivalents in other languages). We need to ask about the correctness of the individual practical and emotional associations in the individual statements Christianity requires us to affirm, as well as the general tendency of the system as a whole.

The deflationist is right about the close connection – indeed, identity – between the question *whether p* and the question *whether ‘p’ is true*. However, Berkeley has a more substantive account of how we are to evaluate the question *whether p*. The pragmatist is right about the close connection between truth and utility. However, because of the correspondence which is needed for truth in the case of observation sentences, truth and utility can come apart to a greater degree than James recognized. This will be the case particularly when the true sentence is embedded in a false sign system. The sentence may be more true than false, in virtue of entailing the right observation sentences, and

28. This may be a point of disagreement with Wittgenstein (see Wittgenstein 1966, 55-59).

yet be deeply problematic pragmatically due to bad emotional and practical associations. Finally, Carnap is right about our freedom to construct alternative sign systems and the need to take account of pragmatic considerations in deciding between them. However, Berkeley, unlike Carnap, sees pragmatic considerations at work even in so-called ‘internal questions,’ and he sees pragmatic considerations as contributing to the *truth* of answers to both internal and external questions.

We have now seen how Berkeley answers Browne. Faith does not ‘terminate in the ear,’ but rather in the *will*. Assent, including religious faith, is a matter of having certain dispositions to speech, thought, feeling, and action. It is this that distinguishes sincere from insincere professions. Furthermore, these dispositions serve to connect our thought and action to the world, and they can do so well or badly. To the degree that they connect us well, the beliefs are true. This does lead to a certain degree of pragmatism and relativism, but it stops short of radical theories such as those of James and (the traditional interpretation of) Carnap by insisting on an objective notion of correspondence. The element of Berkeley’s view which *is* truly radical is his extreme holism which holds that individual sentences can be evaluated for truth only in the context of the total form of life in which they are embedded. The question which shall occupy us in the final two chapters of this dissertation is how Berkeley can defend the claim that our ordinary ways of speaking – our actual form of life – does correspond in the way it must for our assertions to exhibit a high degree of truth. Berkeley’s answer to this question is to be found in his theory of a divine language of nature.

Chapter 8

The Linguistic Structure of Berkeley's World

“Qualities,” Berkeley says, “are nothing else but sensations or ideas, which exist only in a mind perceiving them” (PHK, §78). Bodies, furthermore, are nothing over and above these sensible qualities. Nevertheless, Berkeley insists, it is not the case that “by [his] principles, all that is real and substantial is banished out of the world, and instead thereof a chimerical scheme of ideas takes place.”¹ Rather, “[t]here is a *rerum natura*” (§34). This ‘*rerum natura*’ is meant to be an independent, objective reality to which our system of body talk ought to conform. The reality in question consists in God’s systematic and orderly activity in causing our sensory ideas (PHK, §§29-31, 33, 36; Siris, §293). It is the understanding of this system of divine activity, especially insofar as such understanding leads to successful prediction, that Berkeley calls ‘knowledge of nature’ (PHK, §59; DHP, 245; Siris, §§252-253). This knowledge is embodied to some degree in ordinary body talk, but in a much higher degree in Newtonian physics (PHK, §§105, 110). Thus we can say that, despite some metaphysical confusions, plain language body talk is true to a high degree, but in many contexts the body talk contained in Newtonian physics is true to a higher degree (see above, §7.2.4).

The central question immediately raised by this picture is: what is God up to? (See PHK, §64.) Why, that is, is God engaged in this systematic and orderly causing of my

1. The wording of this objection makes it clear that Berkeley has Edward Stillingfleet’s criticism of Locke in mind (Stillingfleet 1697, 234). For discussion, see Pearce, forthcoming(a).

ideas? When Berkeley faces up to this problem, he typically begins by making a simple observation: if the ideas God caused were *not* systematic and orderly, I would be unable to get around in the world (PHK, §62). The system of rules is “necessary to assist, not the Governor, but the governed” (Siris, §160). This answer is, however, not particularly satisfactory. We may grant that, assuming God is going to give me a series of ideas, it would be inconsistent with divine benevolence that those ideas should be “any how and at random produced” (PHK, §64), but this does not answer the question of why God is giving me ideas in the first place. It is simply not clear what Berkeley’s ‘world’ *is* or why it is here.

To answer this objection, Berkeley makes a surprising and transformative use of a very old metaphor, the ‘book of nature:’ “the reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words” (§65). The structure of Berkeley’s world is a *linguistic* structure.

Berkeley himself traces the ‘book of nature’ metaphor back to Plotinus (Siris, §252). Closer to Berkeley’s time, the metaphor had appeared in the (Dutch Reformed) *Belgic Confession* (article 2), and, famously, in Galileo.

There was, then, nothing surprising, in Berkeley’s day, about speaking of the world as a ‘book’ or ‘discourse’ or talking about the ‘characters’ in which the book was written. However, Berkeley’s specific understanding of the language of nature is original, even radical, in two respects. First, Berkeley’s theory represents a bold synthesis of the old Aristotelian use of this metaphor with the new Galilean use. For the Aristotelians, the ‘characters’ of the book of nature were sensible qualities, while for Galileo the book of nature “is written in mathematical language, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures” (Galilei [1623] 2008, 183; see Redondi 1987, 52). In Berkeley’s philosophy, the language of nature is a mathematical language insofar as

its *grammar* is provided by Newtonian mathematical physics; nevertheless, the *characters* of that language are sensible qualities, including the so-called ‘secondary qualities’ which Galileo shunned.

Berkeley’s second transformation of this traditional talk of a ‘book of nature’ is more radical still. In Berkeley’s hands, the metaphor of a language in which “the Author of Nature constantly speaks to the eyes of all mankind” (Alc, §4.11; cf. NTV, §152) *ceases to be a metaphor*. In Berkeley’s view, it is *literally* the case that “the phenomena of nature . . . form . . . a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse” (Siris, §254). This is Berkeley’s answer to our earlier question about the nature and purpose of the system of ideas God impresses upon us: that system is a discourse, and its structure is, literally, a linguistic structure.

The aim of this chapter will be to show that it is by attributing this linguistic structure to the world that Berkeley aims to preserve, within his immaterialist metaphysics, the truth of claims about structure in both plain language and Newtonian physics. We shall be particularly concerned with two types of structure: the co-instantiation of multiple qualities in a single, enduring object, as represented by our practice of predication (§8.3), and the relation of physical causation (§8.4). Additionally, we shall be concerned with the question of the *content*, the *semantics*, of this ‘discourse,’ and I will show that, contrary to a number of commentators, it is not the case that the ideas in Berkeley’s language of nature signify only other ideas. Rather, it is by the interpretation of the divine discourse that we learn about other minds (§8.6). First, however, it will be necessary to establish the fundamental premise of this investigation, namely, that Berkeley’s divine language hypothesis is intended literally. It is to this task that we now proceed.

8.1 A Literal Language of Nature

My aim in this section is to understand Berkeley's talk of a 'language of nature.' I begin by arguing that Berkeley held that vision is *literally* a language – that is, that it satisfies the same definition of 'language' which is satisfied, e.g., by English – then proceed to examine Berkeley's understanding of the other sense modalities. I will not be concerned with the much-discussed questions of the extent to which Berkeley's theory of vision can be severed from his immaterialism, whether there are inconsistencies between the *New Theory* and the *Principles*, or whether the theory of vision provides (or is taken by Berkeley to provide) part of a positive argument for immaterialism.² Rather, as I have indicated above, my concern in this chapter is to show that Berkeley uses the theory of a language of nature to answer a certain family of objections to immaterialism. The task of this section is, therefore, to answer the question, *what is the theory to which Berkeley appeals in answering these objections?* I will be concerned with Berkeley's direct arguments for this theory only insofar as these arguments shed light on the nature of the theory.³ The theory to which Berkeley appeals, I argue, is one which states that our visual ideas, and possibly also our tactile ideas, *literally* form a "a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse" (*Siris*, §254) 'spoken' by God,⁴ while the other sense modalities provide what we may call 'adjunct signs,' contributing to what is communicated by the language without entering into its syntax.

2. On these questions see, e.g., Armstrong 1960; Atherton 1990, 9-15, 215-229; Yaffe 2003; Atherton 2005.

3. Of course, if Berkeley has compelling arguments for immaterialism, and the theory of a language of nature answers objections to immaterialism better than any rival proposal, this will provide an indirect argument for a language of nature.

4. As the scare-quotes around 'spoken' indicate, the discourse is obviously not literally *spoken*, insofar as it is not produced by the use of a vocal apparatus to create sound waves. More on this below.

Even the best scholars of Berkeley's theory of vision often fall into the trap of speaking of a 'language metaphor,' 'language analogy,' or 'language model' (see, e.g., Atherton 1990, ch. 11, *et passim*). There is a very good reason for this: in the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley proceeds by making a series of *analogies* or *comparisons* between vision and language before finally stating his conclusion "that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of nature" (NTV, §147 [1732 ed.]). In each of these previous passages, Berkeley says that vision is *like* a language in one respect or another (§§17, 32, 51, 66, 73, 140, 143). It is, therefore, natural to read the assertion in §147 metaphorically, and take Berkeley's assertion that vision *is* (constitutes) a language as a rhetorical flourish emphasizing how far the similarities go.

This interpretation cannot, however, make sense of Berkeley's later writings. In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, Berkeley explains that, in the earlier *New Theory of Vision*, he had "observed a certain known method, wherein, from false and popular suppositions, men do often arrive at truth" (TVV, §38). This was known as the 'analytic' method, for it involved beginning with complex preexisting beliefs about the phenomena and 'taking them apart' (the etymological meaning of 'analysis') to discover underlying true principles. Thus in the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley examines a number of well-known optical phenomena and attempts to show, by this examination, that vision must be a language. In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, however, Berkeley explicitly adopted what was known as the 'synthetic' method, beginning from the first principles of his theory and 'putting them together' (the etymological meaning of 'synthesis') to "deduc[e] theorems and solutions of phenomena, and explain[] the nature of visible things and the visive faculty" (§38). Berkeley had likewise, though less explicitly, observed

this ‘synthetic’ method in *Alciphron* IV. In both texts, Berkeley begins with a definition of ‘language’ and proceeds to argue that each element of the definition is (literally) satisfied by vision (Olscamp 1970b, 36-37; Creery 1972; Stoneham 2013, 219-220).

Alciphron defines ‘language’ as:

the arbitrary use of sensible signs, which have no similitude or necessary connexion with the things signified; so as by the apposite management of them, to suggest and exhibit to [the] mind an endless variety of things, differing in nature, time, and place: thereby informing [one], entertaining [one], and directing [one] how to act, not only with regard to things near and present, but also with regard to things distant and future. No matter, whether these signs are pronounced or written, whether they enter by the eye or the ear (*Alc*, §4.7).

In a later speech, this is explicitly called a ‘definition’ (§4.12). In a passage added to the 1752 edition, Euphranor adds an important clarification:

all signs are not language . . . It is the articulation, combination, variety, copiousness, extensive and general use and easy application of signs (all which are commonly found in vision) that constitute the true nature of language (§4.12 [1752 ed.]).

In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, a briefer definition is given: “A great number of arbitrary signs, various and apposite, do constitute a language” (*TVV*, §40).

A ‘sign’ in Berkeley’s usage, is an idea which is used according to a rule. However, in order to constitute a language, there must be a great many signs, organized into a system, and these signs must be (1) arbitrary, (2) various, and (3) apposite. As is well-known, Berkeley’s central focus in his writings on vision is to show that visual ideas are

arbitrary signs of tangible ideas. What he means by this is that the connection between visible and tangible ideas is “neither from necessary deduction to the judgment, nor from similitude to the fancy, but purely and solely from experience, custom, and habit” ([Alc](#), §4.10).⁵ The key here is that there is nothing in the intrinsic nature of the ideas which ‘qualifies’ one to suggest the other ([TVV](#), §68). Instead, the rules connecting visible ideas with tangible ideas are arbitrarily instituted by God.

The ‘variety’ which is required is indicated by the definition from *Alciphron*: the signs making up a language must “suggest and exhibit to [the] mind an endless variety of things, differing in nature, time and place: thereby informing [one], entertaining [one], and directing [one] how to act, not only with regard to things near and present, but also with regard to things distant and future” ([Alc](#), §4.7). Here it is important that the definition is put in Alciphron’s mouth, and Euphranor has not yet expounded his general theory of language. Alciphron is assuming that language accomplishes all of its ends by “suggest[ing] and exhibit[ing] to the mind” various things, an assumption which Euphranor will challenge in the seventh dialogue. Removing this false assumption, we may say that, on Berkeley’s view, a genuine language must be able to talk about a wide variety of subjects and serve a wide variety of ends. A language must not, in other words, be a special purpose sign system like the notation used to record the moves in chess games.

Finally, the use of signs in a language must be ‘apposite.’ The interpretation of this requirement is somewhat difficult. In Alciphron’s definition, it is by “apposite management” that the signs which constitute a language are able to achieve the wide variety of ends at which they aim. The claim here seems to be that which signs are ‘apposite’ (suitable) varies widely from one circumstance to another and it is the ability to make

5. On the nature of this threefold classification, see above, pp. [166-170](#).

these judgments that Alciphron takes to be a sign of intelligent agency. If this is Alciphron's point, then he is likely following Descartes, who claimed that, although it would be possible to make a talking machine, yet "it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do" (CSM, 1:140).⁶

However, there is more than this involved in the requirement that the signs be 'apposite.' In the passage added in 1752, Euphranor refers to "the articulation, combination, variety, copiousness, extensive and general use and easy application of signs." The talk about 'copiousness [and] extensive and general use' is probably intended as an elucidation of the 'variety' requirement, but the rest of this passage may be taken as an explanation of the requirement that the signs be 'apposite.' The passage is explicitly contrasting language, properly so-called, with other "significant sounds, such as the natural cries of animals, or the inarticulate sounds and interjections of men" (Alc, §4.12 [1752 ed.]). A dog's bark or a human's scream may indicate that he is hurt or in danger, yet these are not language, and part of the reason they are not language is that they are not 'articulate.' This is, I take it, a matter of *phonology* (or, in written language, orthography). The 'phonology' of the language of nature will be the topic of the next section. The general idea, however, is that there are a number of basic signs which are distinguished from one another. These play the role of, for instance, the alphabet of written English.

The next requirement is 'combination.' These basic signs are put together into complex signs in a systematic way, and different combinations differ in meaning.

The final requirement, "extensive and general use and easy application," could be taken either as part of being 'apposite' or as part of being 'various.' In any event, the

6. On the possible influence of this discussion on *Alciphron* IV, see Kline 1987.

point is that the signs are organized into a system in such a way that it is easy to construct the complex signs appropriate to any given situation. Alciphron refers to “an endless variety of things;” the basic signs that make up a language can be recombined in indefinitely many ways, to describe unforeseen and unforeseeable situations. Thus, for instance, bizarre sentences like ‘the space aliens are infested with yetis’ are no more difficult to construct than commonplace sentences like ‘the tomatoes are infested with aphids.’

The requirement that the signs be ‘apposite’ is closely related to the requirement that they be ‘various.’ The latter says that there must be many different signs with a wide variety of different meanings; the former says that the signs must be ‘managed’ in such a way as to say the appropriate things given the relevant circumstances and purposes. This entails a very strong variety requirement, for it must be possible to have something ‘apposite’ to say in situations unforeseen when the language was developing. This flexibility is to be obtained by ‘articulation’ and ‘combination’ – in other words, by the *compositionality* of language. The basic signs must be put together to compose complex signs so as to be capable of dealing with indefinitely many situations.

In *Alciphron* and the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, Berkeley argues specifically that vision satisfies each of these conditions, and hence is literally a language. In each case, he takes himself to be summarizing his earlier argument from the *New Theory of Vision*, and his contention is supported by specific texts from the earlier work. Thus it is perhaps not incorrect to say, with Paul Olscamp, that “[t]here is a development in [Berkeley’s] writings from a position where one may reasonably interpret his view of [a language of] nature as a metaphor, to a position where this is no longer reasonable” (Olscamp 1970a,

39).⁷ However, there is no good reason to suppose that this is a substantive change of view rather than merely (as Berkeley himself claims) a change in the mode of exposition.

The bulk of Berkeley's work on vision is devoted to the defense of the claim that vision consists of arbitrary signs. This has been explored at great length in the literature (see especially Atherton 1990), and there is no need to revisit it here. Berkeley spends fewer words on the defense of the other two requirements, and there has been correspondingly less attention to them in the literature. However, that Berkeley takes vision to have the last two features is abundantly clear. For instance, in *Alciphron* the visual language is said to involve “[t]he instantaneous production and reproduction of so many signs . . . adapted to such an endless variety of purposes, ever shifting with the occasions, and suited to them” (*Alc*, §4.14). In the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley had also emphasized the variety of purposes served by the visual language, claiming that, by it, “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” (*NTV*, §147). *Alciphron*, however, goes farther in identifying diverse purposes served by the visual language: “while it informs, it amuses and entertains the mind with such singular pleasure and delight” (*Alc*, §4.15).

Further, as Euphranor explicitly claims, the visual language “answers so *apposite* to the uses and necessities of mankind, informing us more distinctly of those objects, whose nearness and magnitude qualify them to be of greatest detriment or benefit to our bodies” (§4.15, emphasis added). Berkeley further emphasizes that the signs are “combined, dissolved, transposed, [and] diversified” (§4.14) – in other words, that they exhibit the kind of complex contextual variation discussed above. In the *New Theory*, Berkeley gives a specific example of this:

7. Cf. Olscamp 1970b, 36: “By the middle of the *Principles* it is evident that Berkeley is no longer considering the language metaphor as a metaphor.”

Faintness, as well as all other ideas or perceptions which suggest magnitude or distance, does it in the same way that words suggest the notions to which they are annexed. Now, it is known a word pronounced with certain circumstances, or in a certain context, with other words, has not always the same import and signification that it has when pronounced in some other circumstances or different context of words.

The very same visible appearance as to faintness and all other respects, if placed on high, shall not suggest the same magnitude that it would if it were seen at an equal distance on a level with the eye (NTV, §73 [2nd 1709 ed.]).

The context of this discussion is the moon illusion. Berkeley's claim is that the very same visual stimulus, when it occurs while looking to the horizon, will be interpreted differently than when it occurs while looking directly overhead. The complexity of the contextual variation is supposed to explain why we misinterpret the 'horizontal moon.' Whether the particular example is correct need not concern us; the point is that Berkeley takes visual signs to vary in their meaning with their context.

A second example appears in all three of Berkeley's expositions of his theory of vision:

what [a person] sees only suggests to his understanding that, after having passed a certain distance, to be measured by the motion of his body, which is perceivable by touch, he shall come to perceive such and such tangible ideas which have been usually connected with such and such visible ideas. But that one might be deceived by these suggestions of sense, and that there is no necessary connexion between visible and tangible ideas suggested by

them, we need go no farther than the next looking-glass or picture to be convinced (NTV, §45; cf. Alc, §4.12; TVV, §25).

Especially given the context of the *Alciphron* version of this claim, it might be thought to be an answer to the objection that vision is unlike a language insofar as it is impossible for vision to say something false.⁸ However, this objection is not even mentioned in either NTV or TVV, and even in *Alciphron* the claim that the visual language cannot represent falsely is actually only a premise in an argument for the conclusion that “the connexion [between vision and touch is] necessary” (Alc, §4.12).⁹ This is the view Berkeley is arguing against. His argument is that it cannot possibly be the case that, for instance, there is something about the intrinsic nature of a certain kind of visual experience in virtue of which it is necessarily connected with an object’s being (e.g.) five feet in front of me because *in the context of a mirror* the very same visual experience might represent the object as being behind me. We know that it is by these contextual factors that we interpret our visual experience because if I fail to recognize that I am looking into a mirror I will systematically misinterpret the data I am receiving. That the signs involved in the visual language vary with their context in these complex, yet systematic, ways is part of what it means for the signs to be ‘apposite.’

It is, then, Berkeley’s view that vision is literally made up of a “great number of arbitrary signs, various and apposite” (TVV, §40) and that this is sufficient for vision literally to be a language. Of course Berkeley *is* speaking metaphorically when he says that “the voice of the Author of nature . . . speaks to our eyes” (NTV, §152; cf. Alc, §4.11), for God does not literally ‘speak’ – that is, he does not agitate air molecules

8. *Alciphron* has just objected that human languages “do not always suggest real matters of fact. Whereas this natural Language, as you call it, or these visible signs . . . have the same constant regular connexion with matters of fact” (Alc, §4.12).

9. The objection that the visual language cannot represent falsely will be discussed below (§8.6).

by means of a physical vocal apparatus so as to convey signals to us – and the eyes do not literally ‘hear’ – that is, they do not receive auditory ideas. It is for this reason that, when Alciphron first says that he knows the existence of human persons by their speaking to him, Berkeley has Euphranor ask, “Is then the impression of sound so much more evident than that of the other senses?” and Alciphron respond, “Alas! you mistake the point. What I mean is not the sound of speech merely as such, but the arbitrary use of sensible signs . . . No matter whether these signs are pronounced or written, whether they enter by the eye or the ear” (Alc, §4.7). The fact that the divine language is not literally ‘spoken’ does not prevent it from being, literally, a language. Written languages and sign languages are languages in the same sense as spoken languages.

Berkeley’s claim, then, is that vision is literally a language. Below, I will argue that Berkeley takes the language of nature to have a structure very similar to the structure of human languages: it has a ‘phonology’ or ‘orthography’ (§8.2), a lexicon (§8.3), a syntax (§8.4), and a semantics (§8.6). Furthermore, in chapter 9, I will argue that certain difficult problems in Berkeley’s metaphysics and epistemology can be solved by taking the language of nature, like other languages, to be a matter of public social convention, and will show that this can be held consistently with recognizing the privileged status of God as ‘speaker’ of the great ‘discourse’ of nature (Siris, §254). Before proceeding, however, we should pause to examine the status of the other sense modalities in the language of nature.

Famously, in the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley’s view *appears* to be that visual stimuli signify an extra-linguistic, and extra-mental, tangible reality. This, however, is dismissed in the *Principles* as a ‘vulgar error’ (PHK, §44). One therefore wonders what has become of the other sense modalities.

Berkeley addresses this issue explicitly only once, in the 1752 edition of *Alciphron*. In that text, Alciphron objects that “every other sense may as well be deemed a language as that of vision. Smells and tastes, for instance, are signs that inform us of other qualities to which they have neither likeness nor necessary connexion.” It is not clear why this is supposed to be problematic. In any event, Euphranor responds, “That they are signs is certain . . . But it is as certain that all signs are not language . . . Other senses may indeed furnish signs; and yet those signs have no more right than inarticulate sounds to be thought a language” ([Alc](#), §4.12 [1752 ed.]).

Berkeley’s position, then, is that smells and tastes are what we may call ‘adjunct signs.’ They are significant, but they lack “the articulation, combination, variety, copiousness, extensive and general use and easy application” which are characteristic of language (§4.12 [1752 ed.]). These signs form part of the total apparatus by which God ‘speaks’ to us, but they do not fit into the syntax of the visual language. For this reason, I have elsewhere compared them to stoplights ([Pearce 2008](#), 251). Stoplights are no part of the English language, and the reason they do not form a part of it is that they do not fit into the syntax of the language (a green light cannot be one of the words of a sentence). Nevertheless, they are part of the total apparatus by which English speakers customarily communicate. Smell and taste are, in fact, far richer than stoplights, so that we may perhaps also compare them to ‘body language:’ one’s facial expression, or stance, or tone of voice, can change the meanings of one’s words, and at least some of the features that have this effect have it by convention only, yet none of these things is actually part of the English language.

The fact that the discussion in *Alciphron* mentions only ‘smells and tastes’ is significant. Berkeley nowhere discusses the role of hearing in the language of nature, and his remarks about touch are *prima facie* inconsistent. In the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley

wrote that “visible figures represent tangible figures much after the same manner that written words do sounds” (NTV, §143). Colin Turbayne has defended an extremely literal reading of this remark (Turbayne 1970b). However, this is apparently contradicted by a remark in *Alciphron*: “light and colours, with their several shades and degrees . . . suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities of tangible objects . . . just as words suggest the things signified by them” (Alc, §4.10; cf. NTV, §77). The relation between a written word and its spoken equivalent is not at all the same as the relationship between a written word and its referent in the world. We will return to this issue in §8.6.1, below, where I will show that following Turbayne in taking visual ideas to signify tangible stimuli in the way written words signify spoken words, rather than in the way words signify their referents, will help to solve a number of difficult problems about the *meaningfulness* of the language of nature.¹⁰

Conventionally, we speak of one language, English, being both spoken and written, despite the radical differences between spoken and written English (cf. Turbayne 1970b, 7-12). Furthermore, we conventionally say that two people are ‘speaking English’ even if a good deal of their communication is non-verbal. It is for this reason that, beginning in the *Principles*, and especially in *Siris*, Berkeley is able to move beyond his theory of vision as language and speak of a total language of nature which “forms a sort of rational discourse” (*Siris*, §254; cf. PHK, §§65-66).¹¹ This ‘discourse’ consists in a system of signs – chiefly, but not exclusively, visible and tangible ideas – which are ‘various and apposite,’ exhibiting the same kind of flexibility and structure which is exhibited by the signs in human languages. We now proceed to a thorough examination of this structure.

10. Here I depart from my own previous treatment of this issue (Pearce 2008, 250-251), where I classed tactile ideas among what I am now calling the ‘adjunct signs,’ along with smell and taste.

11. For discussion see Turbayne 1970b; Olscamp 1970b, 19-20, 30-31; Pearce 2008, 251.

8.2 Phonology: Sensible Qualities

Written languages have an orthography, and spoken languages a phonology. Sign languages likewise have certain basic units, analogous to letters, of which they are composed. In this section I speak broadly of ‘phonology’ as covering all of these categories, as well as the corresponding items in the language of nature.

In describing the phonology of a language, linguists classify individual sounds into *phonemes*. Roughly speaking, the phoneme is the class of individual symbols between which no distinction is drawn within the language. Thus, for instance, in written English no distinction is drawn between ‘a’ and ‘a,’ while ‘a’ and ‘d’ are distinguished. One reason it is necessary to allow this kind of variation is that there are limits on the accuracy with which we are able to produce symbols matching the paradigms from which we learned. Thus some degree of so-called ‘free variation’ must be permitted (Gleason 1955, 163; Quine 1960, 88-90). Additionally, in actual languages there are systematic variations in the pronunciation of a given phoneme based on its context (Gleason 1955, 164-170).

These details were not known in Berkeley’s day, and thus he was unable to provide a detailed treatment of the phonology of his language of nature. However, it was well-known, and Berkeley is clearly aware (see, e.g., PHK, §65), that a language must start from an ‘alphabet’ of basic symbols (see Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, part 1). Furthermore, Berkeley would certainly have been familiar with at least two instances in which the ‘same’ letter is written differently in different contexts: the characters ‘f’ and ‘s’ in 18th century English, and ‘σ’ and ‘ς’ in the miniscule script for ancient Greek. So Berkeley was aware that pronunciation or orthography for the ‘same’ letter could vary with context.

If we are to assign a phonology to the language of nature, we must first identify the basic symbols out of which the language of nature is constructed, and then show how they are grouped into phonemes. The first step is not difficult, and Berkeley discusses it fairly explicitly. The second step, however, poses grave difficulties which Berkeley does not seem to recognize, yet it seems that some such grouping is needed for his theory to work. These difficulties stretch Berkeley's comparison of the language of nature to human languages but, I will argue, not to the breaking point. Berkeley's language of nature must clearly be a language of a quite unusual sort, but this does not prevent it from satisfying Berkeley's definition of 'language.'

There are two texts in which Berkeley explicitly discusses the phonology of the language of nature:

[T]he reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words. That a few original ideas may be made to signify a great number of effects and actions, it is necessary they be variously combined together: and to the end their use be permanent and universal, these combinations must be made by rule, and with wise contrivance. By this means abundance of information is conveyed unto us, concerning what to expect from such and such actions, and what methods are proper to be taken for the exciting of such and such ideas; which in effect is all that I conceive to be distinctly meant when it is said that, by discerning the figure, texture, and mechanism of the inward parts of bodies, whether natural or artificial, we may attain to know the several uses and properties depending thereon or the nature of the thing (PHK, §65).

[L]ights, shades, and colours, variously combined, answer to the several articulations of sound in language ([Alc](#), §4.10).

The first quotation is about nature in general; the latter is speaking solely of vision. Quite generally, then, the ‘characters’ of the language of nature will be individual sensible qualities.

It may be tempting to identify these characters with Lockean simple ideas. However, there are strong reasons for supposing that Berkeley rejects the existence of simple ideas (Winkler 1989, ch. 3). Most importantly, Berkeley denies the possibility of abstracting visible extension from color or color from visible extension ([PHK](#), §10). We have seen, though, that Berkeley is nevertheless able to group ideas according to different respects of resemblance between them. Thus he can meaningfully talk of the color and the visible figure of ideas as distinct aspects of them, because he can recognize that, for instance, two ideas may resemble in color but not in figure. The visual language consists, essentially, of visual colored regions which sometimes occur together in a single visual experience, and other times succeed one another temporally. A colored region can only be experienced (or imagined) in a total visual field. Nevertheless, one can recognize the same color and visual figure recurring in another context.

Similar remarks will apply to touch. One has, at any moment, a total ‘tangible experience.’ This experience may have identifiable components which can recur in other contexts, but nevertheless cannot occur alone. Thus one cannot feel a shape without feeling it *as* having some degree of roughness or smoothness and feeling it *as* having some temperature. As in vision, so in touch there is variation both in co-occurring components and in succeeding components.

I suspect that Berkeley thought that what set vision and touch apart from the other senses was the complexity of the co-occurring qualities in vision and touch. That is, in

vision and touch one has, in an instant, a complex experience with distinct identifiable components. Berkeley may have thought that this was not the case with the other senses.

If he thought this, then it is not clear whether he was correct. There is a certain amount of intuitive pull to the idea that, for instance, my gustatory experience at any given moment is ‘one simple uniform sensation;’¹² on the other hand, the experienced wine taster may be able to identify several distinct components of the experience of a particular wine. Likewise, the expert musician may be able separately to identify each instrument in the orchestra, and even the less experienced listener may be able to distinguish a few.

In any event, these basic components or aspects, sensible qualities, are the ‘characters’ of Berkeley’s language of nature. If the language of nature is similar to human languages, then we ought to be able to group these characters into phonemes. Here, however, we observe a curious phenomenon. Like speakers who are familiar with a writing system, we native ‘speakers’ of the language of nature have names for what we seem to take as its phonemes, yet there is radical variation among different communities about what these alleged phonemes are. I am referring, of course, to the notoriously wide cross-linguistic variation in categorization of colors and other similar qualities (Quine 1960, 41).

This in itself is not surprising. As the Port-Royalists knew, the letters of written languages typically do not have a precise correspondence with the sounds of spoken languages (Arnauld and Lancelot [1660] 1975, §1.5). This makes it plausible that two

12. I borrow this phrase from see [DHP](#), 176, but Berkeley is there talking about the impossibility of distinguishing “the most vehement and intense degree of heat” from “a very great pain.”

groups who shared a spoken language might have different written languages, with different phonetic alphabets, where there was not a direct correspondence between the letters of one alphabet and those of the other.¹³

Nevertheless, it might be thought, it must be the case that, whatever labels we have in English as opposed to Greek or Mandarin, if nature is a language and we all understand that language, we must be, implicitly, grouping qualities in the same way. Yet it does not seem that we do this. We seem, rather, all to group qualities in the way prescribed by our native (human) language.

It is, however, not at all clear that, in order to understand the language, we must group the phonemes in the same way. The linguist's phonemes are not to be identified with any of the particular psychological, behavioral, or acoustic phenomena which constitute the language; they are, rather, elements of the linguist's *model* of the language (Gleason 1955, 170-171). In other words, the notion of a phoneme comes in, not in the course of trying to *speak* a language, but in the course of trying to gain explicit, articulable understanding of how that language works. Thus the grouping into phonemes is to be justified by the role that it plays in a systematic exposition of the working of the language.

Here, though, is where the real trouble arises. As it turns out, the 'grammarians' of nature – that is, physicists (PHK, §108; see below, §8.4) – have not found it useful to divide colors into discrete categories. In discussing physical optics, they instead discuss the wavelength of the light, which is treated as a continuous variable. Similarly, in physiological optics, we can talk about the degree of stimulation the light produces in each

13. James Van Cleve suggested to me that Hindi and Urdu may be a real-world case like this. The spoken languages are mutually intelligible, but in written form Urdu has 39 letters (all representing consonants) and 10 vowel marks (BBC 2014b), while Hindi has 35 consonants and 11 vowels (BBC 2014a).

kind of receptor in the eye, giving rise to (typically) three continuous variables.¹⁴ Similarly, temperature is continuous, and while Berkeley denies that distance and magnitude (whether tangible or visible) are truly continuous, these are clearly treated as continuous in physics. Thus whereas, in the course of giving a systematic treatment of a human language, we lump the symbols together into discrete ‘bins,’ in the course of giving a systematic treatment of the language of nature, we treat the symbols as continuous. The language of nature does not have a ‘phonology’ of the sort human languages have.

There is, however, a ready answer to be given on Berkeley’s behalf. As Quine once noted (Quine 1960, 87-88), we can imagine the use of a continuous variable as a medium of communication, and this particularly makes sense when the thing we want to represent is itself continuous. Thus Quine envisions a complex mapping of sounds onto colors. The key reason this sort of device is not used in human communication is that we are unable either to produce or to perceive arbitrarily fine gradations in, e.g., sound. This, however, is no limitation for God. Thus the fact that the divine language exhibits continuous phonology (as we may call it) is not a bug, it’s a feature. The divine language is infinitely richer and more sophisticated than human languages. This is just the result Berkeley would want.

One who understands the language of nature must be able to respond to such continuous variation. This requires that the components of our experience be arranged in ‘quality spaces’ (see Quine 1960, 83-85; Goodman 1977, chs. 9 and 10). This is, indeed, a feature of our experience: for instance, some colors seem to us to be ‘closer together’ than others, and this apparent closeness is, as it turns out, connected with various features of the grammar of nature, namely, the science of optics.

14. On the sort of variation that occurs between human individuals at the interface between physical optics and physiological optics, and the difficulties this causes for theories of color, see Block 1999.

The continuous phonology exhibited by the language of nature is the underlying reality which our talk of qualities, both in plain language and in science, aims to capture. Each does indeed capture it. The more or less arbitrary division of color space into distinct categories exhibited by human languages is a useful tool for getting around in the world in ordinary circumstances, and thus a statement using ‘red’ will in many circumstances be ‘truer’ than a statement about the precise wavelength of light being reflected. Yet this does not mean that the categories of one language are ‘truer’ than those of another. Furthermore, it is not the case that plain language is *universally* to be preferred over physics. Berkeley, to be sure, will not allow physics to *displace* plain language and render our secondary quality attributions *false*, as Galileo and the Cartesians do (see below, §8.5), but this does not prevent him from recognizing that the explanation given in physics is more precise and hence will be ‘truer’ where such precision is appropriate. Here is another place where “one and the same thing can be explained in different ways” (DM, §67).

8.3 Lexicography: Co-Instantiation

The basic symbols of a language are put together into words. This also occurs in the language of nature: “the reason ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words” (PHK, §65). This passage occurs in Berkeley’s answer to the objection that, on his view, no purpose can be given for “the curious organizations of plants, and the admirable mechanisms of the parts of animals” (§60). These ‘mechanisms’ are ‘artificial’ in the sense that they are the product of artifice, that is, they have evidently (Berkeley thinks) been arranged for a purpose by a mind. But, it is alleged, if Berkeley’s view is correct, no purpose can

be assigned to them.¹⁵ Berkeley's answer is that the ideas are indeed orderly, and they do indeed have a purpose, but it is unnecessary to suppose that their organization and purpose are causal. (Indeed, Berkeley argues, it is incoherent to suppose this; see above, §6.4.) Rather, the ideas are *grammatically* structured and serve a *communicative* purpose. To serve this purpose, ideas must "be variously combined together . . . [and] these combinations must be made by rule, and with wise contrivance" (PHK, §65). These combinations of ideas are the words of the language of nature.

This provides an alternative avenue of approach to a question discussed above (§6.3), namely, how ideas are combined into bodies. In the previous discussion, I emphasized the role of the human perceiver in combining the ideas. However, there is a well-known tension in Berkeley's thought regarding the respective roles of the human perceiver and the divine cause of sensible ideas in the construction of bodies (Glauser 2007; Hight 2007b; Atherton 2008a). In a number of passages Berkeley says quite explicitly that it is we humans who combine ideas together into objects. For instance:

According as the mind variously combines its ideas, the unit varies . . . We call a window one, a chimney one, and yet a house in which there are many windows and many chimneys has an equal right to be called one (NTV, §109).

[M]en combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times or in different circumstances . . . all which they refer to one name and consider as one thing (DHP, 245)

15. There is some question as to how the 'combinations' could appear purposive without appearing to have some particular purpose. The objection seems to presuppose that this is possible, though Berkeley's reply carries no such presupposition, since Berkeley answers the question of what purpose they appear to have: their purpose is to communicate information in order to guide or actions.

[A] cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions or ideas perceived by various senses; which ideas are united into one thing (or have one name given them) by the mind (DHP, 249)

In these passages, it is clear that, when we talk about familiar objects such as windows, chimneys, houses, and cherries, we combine ideas. Furthermore, Berkeley often emphasizes that we have a great deal of freedom in deciding which combinations to construct (see, e.g., NTV, §109; PHK, §12). However, as Richard Glauser points out (Glauser 2007, 54-55), the very passage from the *Principles* which we have been discussing causes rather serious problems for this interpretation, for it is surely God, and not humans, who has combined ideas into ‘machines’ as described in PHK, §§60-66.

The standard way of solving this problem is to appeal to Berkeley’s frequent remarks to the effect that we combine ideas which we have “observed . . . to have some connection in nature” (DHP, 245), that is, that our combining of ideas is done according to the connections which we call ‘laws of nature’ (PHK, §30; see, e.g., Muehlmann 1992, 219-223, *et passim*; Atherton 2008a, 93). This approach can allow for significant freedom in how we combine ideas, while still holding that there are divinely instituted constraints on our choice (Stoneham 2002, §8.3.1), thus giving God an important role in ‘forming ideas into machines.’

Glauser advocates an alternative interpretation on which *particular* objects consist of ideas combined together by God, while *sorts* of objects are made by humans (Glauser 2007). This interpretation sees Berkeley as following Locke’s view “That *General and Universal*, belong not to the real existence of Things; but *are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding*” (EHU, §3.3.11). On Glauser’s reading, Berkeley, like Locke, would take this claim to mark a contrast between the general and the particular,

with the particular existing *in rerum natura*, while the general exists only in the finite minds that construct general signs.

Neither of these readings is fully satisfactory as it stands. The standard interpretation does not adequately account for the kind of unity God is taken to bestow on objects in PHK, §§60-66, for not all ideas which, according to the laws of nature, ‘go together,’ thereby become constituents of a common object. As a result, if the standard interpretation is to solve the problem, it must be supplemented by an account of the kind of ‘going together’ which constitutes being ‘formed into a machine’ and explain the role of this phenomenon in our combining activity.

Glauser’s position, on the other hand, fails to recognize just how radical Berkeley’s views on identity are. I have argued above (§6.6) that, in Berkeley’s view, there is no such thing as unity independent of being ‘considered as one’ by some mind. I have also argued that, since humans cannot have all of the constituent ideas of a body at once, we can consider these bodies as one only by establishing conventions for the use of words (§6.3). Thus, if my earlier conclusions are correct, individuals, like sorts, must be ‘the workmanship of the understanding.’ If I am right, though, then how are we to account for those passages which, Glauser rightly points out, seem clearly to imply that God combines ideas into bodies? What are the respective roles of the divine and the human in the assembling of ideas into bodies?

Margaret Atherton has suggested that Berkeley’s language of nature theory provides a way forward. On Atherton’s reading, our grouping of ideas into objects is part of our process of *interpreting* the language of nature. “What ties the entire collection [of ideas] together [into a physical object] are the relations of sign to signification” (Atherton 2008a, 95). As Atherton understands this process of interpretation, it is primarily a process of deriving “a set of expectations or predictions” (95) from some particular

group of (e.g.) cherry perceptions, by understanding the lawful connections between one idea and another (cf. [Siris](#), §§252-253).

Atherton has, I believe, identified the most important point that must be recognized if we are to make progress on the problem of divine and human roles in object construction: our ideas are *signs*, used according to rules adopted by God, which we call ‘laws of nature’ ([PHK](#), §30), and our collecting or combining of those ideas is part of the process of *interpretation* of those signs. However, as Atherton explicitly recognizes ([Atherton 2008a](#), 99-100), this is not yet a full solution to the problem.

Atherton discusses one reason why the problem is not yet solved. If we are to suppose that God, by ‘speaking’ the language of nature to us, ‘forms ideas into machines’ by means of the laws of nature God has established, then it seems that which ideas ‘go together’ is determined by God’s intentions. However, if this were so then it would seem to raise the possibility that we might misinterpret God’s intentions *while nevertheless making correct predictions*. Yet Berkeley seems to think that as long as our expectations are being fulfilled, we are succeeding at our interpretive task (97-100).

Beyond this, Atherton has not yet solved the general difficulty for lawfulness accounts which I mentioned above. That is, she has not shown how to distinguish between those lawful connections which bind ideas together into objects and those which do not. To put the matter another way: she has not shown how to distinguish between *co-instantiation* and *physical causation*. Both of these relations must involve lawful connections between ideas and, if Berkeley’s world is to exhibit the kind of structure which commonsense and Newtonian physics take the world to exhibit, then these two relations must be *distinct*.

Atherton’s divine language approach can, however, be extended to solve these difficulties, and the needed extensions are both philosophically and textually well-motivated

in terms of Berkeley's theory of language and his pronouncements about how to understand the structure of the perceived world in linguistic terms.

We can begin to respond to the problem of possible misinterpretation by observing that a language can be correctly described in more than one way. The rules followed by speakers of a language are not themselves linguistic entities and may be given more than one equally correct linguistic expression. Furthermore, as the phrase '*equally correct*' suggests, and as I have argued in §7.2.4, this sort of 'correctness,' for Berkeley, comes in degrees and is largely constituted by correctness of prediction. To know what rule is being followed is to be able to 'see' what the rule will command in real or imagined circumstances; a linguistic formulation of the rule is merely an aid to such knowledge (see ch. 5).

In terms of the metaphor used in §7.2.4, we may say that what Berkeley means in claiming that we are correct in our ordinary claims about bodies is that our body talk is painting a highly, but not perfectly, accurate portrait of God's orderly, rule-governed productive activity. There are many different ways of painting a highly accurate portrait. (Paintings in different styles, different media, from different angles, or in different lighting may all be equally accurate representations of the subject.) This accounts for Berkeley's pronouncements about our freedom in grouping ideas. Nevertheless, some groupings 'fit' better than others, and these degrees of fit are due to the rules God follows. Hence we can say that these ideas are 'put together' or 'formed into machines' by God. We, however, do not perceive all of the grouped ideas at once. Since we perceive them separately we must put them together as part of our interpretive activity. In this activity of reassembly, there are many different ways of getting things (mostly) right.

There is an important objection to this approach. Part of what the correctness of my understanding amounts to is my being able to imagine what ideas I would have in

various counterfactual situations. It seems, then, that a Cartesian demon could deceive me by explicitly formulating some bizarre rule which diverges radically from my expectations in counterfactual situations and forming the intention to follow this rule in causing my ideas. Berkeley's anti-skeptical project requires him to eliminate this apparent possibility. In chapter 9, I will argue that Berkeley's recognition of the essentially public nature of language can and should be applied to the language of nature and that, by this means, this kind of skeptical scenario can indeed be ruled out. For now, however, we will set this difficulty aside and assume that God follows rules which do not strike us as bizarre, and hence that our inductively formed beliefs about what counterfactual circumstances would be like are roughly accurate.¹⁶

The second problem, the problem of distinguishing physical causation from co-instantiation, can be solved by taking seriously Berkeley's remarks about the role of physical objects in the language of nature, already mentioned above. According to Berkeley, "ideas are formed into machines" for the same reason letters are combined into words (PHK, §65). By 'machines,' Berkeley means complex, highly organized bodies, but presumably similar remarks apply to simpler bodies, like rocks. Bodies are the *words* of the language of nature. Thus, although Atherton is correct that grouping ideas into objects is *part of the process* of interpretation, it is important to recognize that it is only the beginning of this process. This combining activity is part of *parsing* the language of nature, which is merely a preliminary to interpretation proper. It is true, as Atherton says, that this 'parsing' is sufficient to allow us to make certain correct predictions, yet Berkeley emphasizes that "fram[ing] general rules from the phenomena, and afterward deriv[ing] the phenomena from those rules" is not yet *interpreting* nature, but merely describing its grammar (§108). To interpret nature is

16. Berkeley explicitly recognizes the need for such an assumption. See PHK, §107; DM, §34.

to recreate and exalt the mind, with a prospect of the beauty, order extent, and variety of natural things; hence by proper inferences to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator; and lastly, to make the several parts of the Creation, so far as in us lies, subservient to the ends they were designs for, God's glory, and the sustentation and comfort of our selves and fellow creatures (PHK, §109).

The grouping with which we are presently concerned is part of the *grammar* of the language, and not part of its semantics. In particular, the activity of grouping ideas into objects is one of identifying the *word boundaries* of the language and, more generally, the identification and classification of physical objects is the *lexicography* of the language of nature.

There are two kinds of grouping involved in lexicography. The first is the grouping of sounds or characters in a single utterance or inscription into a single word. The second is the grouping of words in various utterances and inscriptions, which are not qualitatively identical, into *lexemes*. A dictionary aims to capture, in each entry, a single lexeme. This single lexeme will typically involve many distinct words which, in many languages (including all languages familiar to Berkeley) will vary systematically according to patterns of conjugation or declension. Thus, for instance, 'run' and 'runs' are different words belonging to the same lexeme.

This can provide a Berkeleian solution to the problem of the bent visual perception of the straight oar half-submersed in water. Philonous says of this case,

[The perceiver] is not mistaken with respect to the ideas he actually perceives; but in the inferences he makes from his present perceptions. Thus in the case of the oar, what he immediately perceives by sight is certainly crooked; and so far he is in the right. But if he thence conclude, that upon

taking the oar out of the water he shall perceive the same crookedness; or that it would affect his touch as crooked things are wont to do: in that he is mistaken ([DHP](#), 238).

One can compare the person confused about the oar to a beginning Greek student encountering the word ‘ἔλυσσά’ and looking under ‘ε’ in a lexicon. The student has not yet learned the proper conjugation patterns, and, in particular, the rule whereby past indicative forms of ancient Greek verbs receive an initial ‘ε’ as an ‘augment,’ so that the relevant dictionary headword will in fact be found under ‘λ.’ Similarly, the perceiver who is confused by the oar has gotten as far as correctly recognizing the visual perception of the oar as a single word, but has not understood the ‘conjugation’ pattern for this word by means of which she ought to have predicted that most of the other appearances of the oar would be straight.

As with phonology, so lexicography is part of a model constructed by linguists to aid us in representing and understanding the patterns of linguistic phenomena. The lexicographer will adopt a convention whereby some particular verb form is used as the dictionary headword. (In our actual conventions, usually the first person present indicative active.) This form need not, however, be in any way privileged in the psychological processes of native speakers. For instance, if it were to turn out that children learning English natively typically first thought of the form ‘runs’ and then dropped the ‘s’ to form the first person, it would not therefore follow that the lexicographer was making an error in using ‘run’ as the dictionary headword. What is more important from the lexicographer’s perspective is that the selection should make things as easy as possible for those who are learning the language ‘by rule’ (see §5.1), and that it should make the rules of the language as easy to state as possible. It is to achieve this kind of ease in stating and understanding the rules that we think of the oar – the lexeme – as straight,

despite the fact that in appropriate circumstances it will appear bent, just as we think of the lexeme ‘λω’ as beginning with ‘λ,’ despite the fact that that, under certain circumstances, it is spelled with an initial ‘ε.’

The grouping of ideas into objects is analogous to the grouping of sounds or letters into words, and words into lexemes, in human languages. We have so far been implicitly restricting our attention to visual appearances. What shall we say of the other senses?

As we have discussed, smell and taste, at least, are held by Berkeley to lack the sort of complex structure exhibited by language proper, so it is to be expected that they will lack a lexicography. Of course one can distinguish one smell or taste from another, and could thereby construct a sort of ‘dictionary’ of smells and tastes, but these signs would not be words, insofar as they would not exhibit *morphology*, and would not combine syntactically into larger units. We therefore need not discuss these cases further. We will also continue to follow Berkeley in neglecting hearing.

What remains is to discuss touch. The relation between sight and touch is, of course, a major object of Berkeley’s concern. In §8.1, I endorsed Turbayne’s suggestion that we take Berkeley seriously when he says that the relation of vision to touch is like the relation of written to spoken English (NTV, §143; Turbayne 1970b). ‘Commonsense’ objects can be both seen and touched but there is, according to Berkeley, something sloppy about the claim that we “see the same object that we feel” (DHP, 245; cf. NTV, §49). The reason we do not draw this distinction is that “the combination of visible ideas has constantly the same name with the combination of tangible ideas wherewith it is connected, which of necessity arises from the use and end of language” (NTV, §49). Later in the *New Theory*, Berkeley explains how this occurs:

It is customary to call written words and the things they signify by the same name: for words not being regarded in their own nature, or otherwise than

as they are marks of things, it had been superfluous, and beside the design of language, to have given them names distinct from those of the things marked by them (NTV, §140).

The spoken word, of course, likewise shares its name with the written word and the referent.

The observation Berkeley is making is that it is only for purposes of linguistics, philosophy, and the like intellectual endeavors that a careful distinction between written words, spoken words, and their objects is needed. In plain language contexts there is typically no danger of confusion, and so it is more efficient to avoid the multiplication of vocabulary. The same is true regarding the distinction between visible and tangible objects. It is necessary in certain scientific and philosophical contexts, but it would be counter-productive to try to introduce it into plain language.

The conventions of plain English physical object talk ‘tie together’ multi-modal collections of ideas. What Berkeley argues in the *New Theory* is that we can achieve a more precise, explicit understanding of the structure of the language of nature by consistently distinguishing the tangible words from the visible words. However, just as constant explicit attention to the specific mode of communication (spoken, written, signed) is rarely helpful to speaking and understanding human language, so likewise the distinction which serves us well in *analyzing* the language of nature would serve us poorly in ‘reading’ that language most of the time. This is an instance of a more general observation Berkeley makes. On the one hand, Newtonian science is extremely practically useful in a wide variety of contexts: it has led to “many inventions in Mechanics” so that we can “frame engines by means of which things difficult and otherwise impossible are performed” (Alc, §7.10). Yet, on the other hand, just as rough-and-ready intuitive

grammatical judgments are often more useful than explicit rules in speaking and understanding a language, so also our intuitive ‘folk physics’ is often more useful in getting around in the world than explicit judgments arrived at by calculation from the Newtonian laws (PHK, §§108-109). This is a theme to which we shall frequently return in the remainder of this chapter.

8.4 Syntax: Causation and Laws

Our study thus far has already touched on the topic of physical causes and laws at a number of points. It will be helpful briefly to review these before addressing the topic of how physical causes and laws fit into the language of nature.

In §7.2, I argued that Berkeley holds that plain language causal talk – including sentences like ‘fire warms’ (PHK, §31) which do not include the word ‘cause’ or its cognates – is *mostly true* or *true to a high degree*. There are two closely related aspects of this kind of talk which are responsible for this high degree of truth: it gives us *accurate expectations* and provides *useful instructions*. There is, however, a temptation to think that such claims tell us what really *makes* things happen, and this is an error, for only spirits can genuinely make things happen. Thus this kind of talk contains a mixture of truth and falsehood, and reform is needed in order that we may speak more truly. This reform involves distinguishing physical causation from genuine efficient causation (see PHK, §§51-52; Siris, §§154-155).

The reason the expectations and instructions provided by our causal talk map correctly onto the world is that, in causing our perceptions, God is following certain rules, and it is these rules which we call ‘the laws of nature’ (see above, pp.175-178). Physics aims to improve on our plain language causal talk by the explicit formulation of rules which allow us to use a ‘mathematical method’ (DM, §38) to arrive at predictions with

greater precision and accuracy (see above, §§3.3 and 6.2). In the context of this endeavor, we may use the term ‘law’ in a narrower sense to refer to the *fundamental* laws, or principles, “in which are grounded and contained the whole discipline” of physics (DM, §36). Berkeley likely has Newton’s three laws of motion in mind here.

Berkeley is quite explicit in connecting this talk of laws and causes with the language of nature. Yet there is an apparent inconsistency in Berkeley’s remarks. On the one hand, Berkeley says repeatedly that the relation of cause to effect is the relation of sign to thing signified (PHK, §§65-66; TVV, §13). On the other hand, he also repeatedly says that the laws of physics provide a *grammar* for nature (PHK, §§108-110; Siris, §§252-254). The first claim suggests that the relation of cause to effect is a *semantic* relation, while the second claim suggests that it is a *syntactic* relation.

This may become clearer by the following illustration. Berkeley’s claim that the relation of cause to effect is sign to thing signified suggests that it is like the relationship of ‘rock’ to rocks. On the other hand, Berkeley’s claim that laws are grammatical rules suggests that a law can be understood on analogy to syntactic rules of English, like the rule that a transitive verb must be followed by its direct object. But the relationship of (physical) cause to effect is one in which a law requires that the effect follows the cause. Thus it would seem that the relationship of cause to effect is like the relationship of a transitive verb to its direct object. But this is not at all a relation of sign to thing signified (cf. Pearce 2008, 257-259).¹⁷

One obvious approach to solving this problem would proceed by pointing out that Berkeley describes visual ideas as ‘marks and prognostics’ of tactile ideas (PHK, §44), and likewise asserts that “The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it” (§65). The approach I have in

17. The response to this problem I provide here differs from the one I suggested in Pearce 2008, 264.

mind would take this to be all Berkeley means in describing the cause as the sign of the effect: there is not a real semantic relation, it is merely that one may predict the effect on the basis of the cause.

I have two reasons for rejecting this approach. First, it would make Berkeley's seriousness about regarding the world as a 'discourse' fluctuate wildly, sometimes using 'sign' in a very strong sense for a conventionally meaningful item such as a word in a language, and at other times using it in this very weak sense. Second, and more importantly, Berkeley insists that providing successful predictions and useful instructions is part of what makes the 'discourse' of nature meaningful (PHK, §109; Alc, §§4.14-15; see below, §8.6). Hence it seems that physical causation should indeed be taken as part of the semantics of the language.

A better solution begins by pointing out that we have been making a simplistic and uncritical assumption about the relation of causes to laws. The two claims which are the root of our difficulty here are: (1) that causes signify their effects, and (2) that laws of nature are grammar rules. These two claims produce contradictory results only given the further assumption that *A* causes *B* if and only if *B* follows from *A* according to the laws. This assumption about the relationship of causes to laws makes it appear that causes and laws should be either both syntactic or both semantic. However, this further assumption is not something Berkeley ever asserts. If Berkeley rejected this assumption, that would explain why he didn't see any problem with the combination of a semantic view of causes with a syntactic view of laws.

Let us briefly reflect on the relation of syntax to semantics, and see whether this can clarify Berkeley's view. The syntax of English is heavily dependent on word order. Thus, in a simple subject-verb-object sentence like 'John loves Mary,' the subject is whichever noun comes before the verb, and the object is whichever noun comes after. As

a result, switching the word order to ‘Mary loves John’ produces a sentence with a very different meaning. The syntactic rules determine the grammatical relations between the words, and this in turn determines how those words, together, produce a meaningful sentence. This can be observed vividly in the case of sentences which are structurally ambiguous, such as ‘I saw the person with the telescope.’ Here (as in many English examples) the structural ambiguity is due to uncertainty as to what the prepositional phrase modifies (it can modify either the verb ‘saw’ or the noun phrase ‘the person’). There are also cases in which an individual word will have different meanings depending on the syntax of the sentence. Thus, for instance, the sentence ‘fruit flies like a banana’ can be (perversely) parsed with ‘flies’ as the main verb and ‘like’ as a preposition, yielding an interpretation radically different from the obviously intended one.

Now let us consider Newton’s laws of motion. As we have observed above (§6.2), these laws provide instructions both for the attribution of forces to bodies and for the generation of further predictions from such attributions. If we consider, for instance, the elliptical motion of the earth, the first law tells us that some force is acting on the earth, since elliptical motion is non-inertial. The second law allows us to calculate the magnitude and direction of that force. The third law tells us that the force must be exerted by a body on which the earth exerts an equal and opposite force. If we assume that we are dealing with a single gravitational force, then we may bring in the Law of Universal Gravitation. Given sufficiently complete information about the earth’s motion, this will allow us to compute the mass of this other body and the location of its center of gravity.

The earth and the sun are bodies and bodies, I have argued, are the *words* of the language of nature. What we have done by considering the laws of physics is to give an account of the dynamic *relationship* between these two bodies. The relationships with

which syntax are concerned are, again, purely part of the linguist's model and not part of her data. In English, syntactic relations happen to be tied heavily to word order, but there are other languages in which the same syntactical relation (e.g., of verb to direct object) occurs in which the word order is consistently reversed, and there are even languages in which the words can bear the same syntactic relation regardless of which order they are in, because these syntactic relations are marked by some means other than word order (typically morphology). Similarly, the force between the earth and the sun is a feature not of the perceived earth and sun, but of the *model* we are given in Newton's 'grammar of nature' (see [PHK](#), §§108-110).

In *parsing* the sun-Earth system, we must first group the sun ideas into one object and the Earth ideas into another, recognizing the word boundaries. Then, we need to understand the grammatical (i.e., dynamic) relationship between these two words. Once we have done this, we are in a position to interpret the system by seeing what it means in terms of prediction.

The sun-Earth system is far enough removed from our ordinary experience that we would not parse it correctly without the aid of explicitly formulated laws of physics. Of course, once one gains some experience in physics, or simply learns some new rules of thumb discovered by physicists, one may be able to do this without explicitly stating what the forces at work in the system are, but one cannot do this with untutored commonsense.

However, untutored commonsense is a perfectly good interpreter of nature in most everyday cases (§108). Physics is an explicit account of the grammar of nature. The reason having such an account is of practical, rather than merely academic, interest is that it expands the domain within which our interpretations are accurate, and it increases

the precision of our interpretations. It also gives us an articulable basis for our predictions (rather than a mere ‘knack’ or ‘hunch’ or ‘intuition’) which improves our ability to communicate about the interpretation of nature. (Similarly, even among native English speakers, the explicit use of grammatical categories can be useful for resolving interpretive disputes about English texts, as historians of philosophy well know.)

In the language of nature, perhaps even more so than in English, the syntax is rarely ambiguous in context. However, in the absence of context there can be extreme ambiguity. Imagine, for instance, being shown a photograph of a tabletop from above and being asked to describe the Newtonian forces in operation. One would be expected to describe the balanced forces of gravity pulling the tabletop down on its legs, and the legs pushing up on the tabletop. However, the legs are out of view in the photo, so for all one knows from the photo alone (without background assumptions about tables) there may be no legs there at all: the tabletop could be in free fall.

These are two different ways of interpreting the photo, which yield different beliefs about what happened immediately before and after the photo was taken. The different interpretations arise from different understandings of the *syntax* of the physical system in view, just as in cases of structural ambiguity in English.

Let us return now to causal talk. Berkeley writes, “The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer on my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it.” (PHK, §65). When one has the visual orange sensations of the fire, one engages in an activity of parsing this experience. Thus one groups the fire sensations together into one object (word), and one implicitly takes it to be related to the other objects around it in a certain way. For instance, one takes the fire to be *burning* the wood. This relation between the fire and the wood is a syntactic one. One does not perceive the burning. Rather, one perceives the fire and the wood, in close proximity to one another, each

undergoing certain transformations. In this way the notion of burning is like the notion of force. It is a notion one uses to construe the objects of one's experience as related in certain ways, and this construal is part of the process of interpretation which leads to prediction. Parsing the situation properly, so that we regard the fire as burning the wood, leads us to predict that the wood will turn to ash, and for this reason we say that the fire *causes* the wood to turn to ash. The commonsense 'laws' at work here are generalizations like *fire needs fuel* and *wood is combustible*. When we see the fire, before we can interpret the situation and make our predictions, we need to find some combustible object which can be assigned the grammatical role of fuel for the fire. My body, like the wood, is combustible, and as there are certain ideas that let me know that the wood is burning, so pain is one of the ideas that lets me know my body is burning. Thus once I parse the situation as fire burning wood, I am in a position to interpret the situation by predicting that I will experience pain if I get too close.

In non-linguistic terms, we can put Berkeley's view of the relationship between laws and causes like this: the laws are the general principles needed to conceptualize a given situation in a way that makes accurate prediction possible. The causes are the items which, in that conceptualization, are thought of as leading to the effect. In linguistic terms, the laws are the syntactic rules that allow us to conceive of the relations between words (bodies) in the way we need to in order to interpret our experience.

8.5 Excursus on Commonsense and Natural Science

It is often said that Berkeley differs from most other early modern philosophers, and especially from his fellow idealist, Leibniz, in that his philosophy aims to vindicate the 'manifest image' at the expense of the 'scientific image' (Wilson 1987; R. M. Adams 1994, 226; Roberts 2007, ch. 6). This assertion is correct as far as it goes, but if the

interpretation of Berkeley's metaphysics and philosophy of science which I have so far developed is correct, then Berkeley's vindication is far less 'expensive' than is often supposed. In this section, we take a brief detour from our main line of argument to examine Berkeley's attitude to the 'new science' and the various non-commonsensual entities posited by it.

One of the leading ideas of the new science was its emphasis on the use of *instruments*. The proponents of this view held, against the Aristotelians, that it was by systematic experimentation with the aid of instruments such as the telescope, microscope, or thermometer, *rather than* by the unaided senses that the 'true natures' of objects were revealed (see, e.g., Bacon [1620] 2000, 17-18, 125-126, 170-172; Galilei [1632] 2008, 244-248). Berkeley's defense of 'commonsense' is in large part a defense of trust in the deliverances of the unaided senses (see below, §9.1), and to this extent he can be seen as an opponent of the new science. Berkeley sees the new science as having the consequence that "something there is in every drop of water, every grain of sand, which it is beyond the power of human understanding to fathom or comprehend," and regards this conclusion as objectionably skeptical. In accepting this skeptical result, Berkeley says, "we are influenced by false principles to that degree as to mistrust our senses, and think we know nothing of those things which we perfectly comprehend" (PHK, §101). Philonous puts Berkeley's position more bluntly: "What [the materialist] call[s] the empty forms and outside of things seems to me the very things themselves" (DHP, 244). It is by the unaided senses that we discover the true natures of objects.

In addition to insisting that real knowledge is gained by the unaided senses, Berkeley demotes many of the theoretical entities of physics – including, most notably, forces – to the status of mere quasi-entities, whose 'natures' and existence conditions are whatever the physicist defines them to be (DM, §67). Finally, Berkeley is committed to the claim

that nothing inanimate can be a genuine cause, or have any existence independent of perception. However, the whole scientific (natural philosophical) enterprise, according to many of its early modern practitioners, is concerned with the discovery of the hidden (i.e. unperceived) causes of the qualities and behavior of objects. Berkeley clearly and explicitly rejects this approach to natural philosophy (PHK, §§50, 107; DM, §§35-37; Siris, §§231, 247, 249, 251).

On the other hand, Berkeley's overall attitude toward Newton, the leading practitioner of the 'new science' in his day, is overwhelmingly positive (see, e.g., PHK, §110), and Berkeley says that his remarks about scientific methodology are directed toward rendering an already useful discipline all the more useful by eliminating pointless disputes within it (DHP, subtitle [1713 ed.]; DM, §66; Alc, §§7.9-10). Thus Berkeley must, in some sense, affirm the 'new science.'

In order to solve this puzzle, we need first to get clear on the exact nature of Berkeley's criticism of the natural philosophy of his day. When Berkeley objects to the view that our unaided senses do not reveal to us the 'true natures' of water and sand and other familiar things, he is *not* objecting to the view that such things have microscopic parts. Berkeley clearly and explicitly accepts the existence of "the clockwork of nature, [a]¹⁸ great part whereof is so wonderfully fine and subtle as scarce to be discerned by the best microscope" (PHK, §60; cf. DHP, 245).¹⁹ What Berkeley rejects is rather "the current opinion that every thing includes within it self the cause of its properties, or that there is in each object an inward essence, which is the source whence its discernible qualities flow and whereon they depend" (PHK, §102). When Berkeley writes in his notebooks,

18. Clarke's brackets.

19. For discussion, see Tipton 1982, 168-169; Garber 1982, 182-184; Wilson 1985, 134-138; Winkler 1989, 265-275; Atherton 1991, 52-53.

“My Doctrine affects the Essences of the Corpuscularians” (N, §234), *it is the essences and not the corpuscles he is rejecting*.

As Margaret Atherton has shown in her careful and detailed study (Atherton 1991), the chief target here is the Cartesian notion of scientific explanation, of which Berkeley provides an admirably clear account in the *Principles* passage just quoted. The Cartesians thought that scientific explanation depended on ‘grasping’ an ‘inward essence’ and showing how the observed qualities and behavior of the object follow from this essence. Locke argued that such a ‘grasp’ was impossible and, hence, that the prospects for scientific explanation – or, as he preferred to put it, for making natural philosophy a science (EHU, §4.12.10) – were dim (§§4.3.25-26, 4.6.15, 4.12.9-10).²⁰ Berkeley’s response is to deny that this is what natural philosophy is about. Natural philosophy cannot be about this, for a physical object does not *have* an “inward essence . . . whence its discernible qualities flow.” The ‘real nature’ of a body is nothing but its sensible appearance.

If the senses grasp the ‘real natures’ of things, then what role is there for science, with its use of experiments, instruments, and mathematical reasoning? Berkeley writes,

If we . . . consider the difference there is betwixt natural philosophers and other men with regard to their knowledge of the phenomena, we shall find it consists . . . only in a greater largeness of comprehension, whereby analogies, harmonies, and agreements are discovered in the works of nature, and the particular effects explained, that is, reduced to general rules . . . [This knowledge] enable[s] us to make very probable conjectures, touching things that may have happened at very great distances of time and place, as well as to predict things to come (PHK, §105)

20. See Garber 1982, 175-178; McCann 1994, §3; Downing 1998, 399-412.

This is in line with Philonous's remark in the *Dialogues* that the use of microscopes is "only to know what ideas are connected together" and that this is all we mean by knowledge "of the nature of things" (DHP, 245).

The methods of natural science – including careful, systematic observation with the aid of instruments, as well as the intellectual activity whereby the observed rules of nature "are refined by reason and rendered universal" (DM, §36) – are simply methods for arriving at a more precise and comprehensive knowledge of the relations between ideas. The fact that, prior to engaging in natural science we are ignorant of many of these connections does not threaten Berkeley's anti-skeptical project. Rather than undermining commonsense, knowledge of natural science merely supplements it (Garber 1982, 189-191).

The introduction of 'mathematical hypotheses' is, as we have already seen (above, §6.2), an essential part of the 'universalizing' task of natural science. The introduction of these entities is necessary to "make notions or, at least, propositions, universal" (DM, §7). Just as the linguist, in order to give a general account of the grammar of English must conceptualize the auditory phenomena of the language by means of certain specialized grammatical concepts which cannot be straightforwardly mapped onto particular disturbances of the air, the physicist, in order to give a general account of the grammar of nature, must introduce entities which she does not directly observe.

Berkeley *is* demoting the reality of the physicist's theoretical entities below that of commonsense objects. Certainly he is rejecting the claim that the entities of fundamental physics are *more* real, or more fundamental, than the entities of commonsense. But, as I argued in chapter 6, the gap between bodies and forces is not so wide as is commonly supposed, and this result generalizes. In linguistic terms, the point can be made like

this: commonsense concepts like *word* and *letter* are part of a constructed model of language, just like the linguist's more precise concepts, *lexeme* and *phoneme*. Indeed, the typical speaker, even one who has never studied linguistics, will have a certain amount of explicit grammatical knowledge, and this knowledge must *necessarily* be given in terms of such a model. The linguist's model is more precise, accurate, and general, but for just this reason must be further removed from the concrete phenomena of language. To repeat an example used above, a *direct object* cannot be *defined* in terms of sounds or marks alone, for no such definition could possibly be valid cross-linguistically. Thus the status of direct-objecthood is something like a mathematical hypothesis: this status is not represented in sense experience, but must be introduced in order to give a suitably general account of the phenomena of language. For Berkeley, this movement away from the senses is part and parcel of generality, and hence is essential to all 'scientific' knowledge whatsoever (Alc, §§7.14-16).

Plain language body talk is part of a commonsense grammar of the language of nature. Like the commonsense grammar of English, it involves only concepts that are fairly closely tied to concrete sense experience. Yet it ultimately differs from the more general and technical grammar of the physicist only in degree. In this way, Berkeley preserves the ability of natural science to teach us things we didn't know before, and defends the legitimacy of its introduction of new entities unknown to commonsense, while denying to natural science the right to take away the knowledge the person on the street has had all along.

8.6 Semantics

Perhaps the most central problem with Berkeley's divine language hypothesis is the difficulty of giving an account of the *semantics* of the divine language (Mabbott 1931,

26-28; Olscamp 1970b, 32-46; Creery 1972, 218-221; Roberts 2007, 65). If the Author of Nature is speaking to our eyes (NTV, §152), what is he *saying*?

The texts in which Berkeley deals with this issue can be divided into three categories. In the first set of texts, Berkeley speaks of sensory ideas conveying information about other ideas. In these texts, Berkeley typically emphasizes the role of the language of nature both in providing beliefs or expectations about what ideas we will have in the future (often conditionally on our own actions), and in giving us instructions about what course of action to take. In the second set of texts, Berkeley says that sensory ideas signify other finite minds and their states and activities. In the third set of texts, Berkeley says that the language of nature reveals to us God and his attributes.

Most existing treatments of Berkeley's language of nature focus on one or the other of the first and third sets of texts. The second set of texts is almost uniformly ignored. This is quite odd, since – as I have argued before (Pearce 2008), and will now argue again – unless information about other minds is provided to us by the language of nature, Berkeley will be stuck in solipsism.

Given Berkeley's emphasis on the flexibility of language (including the language of nature) and the wide variety of purposes it can serve (see above, §8.1), there is no reason why Berkeley should not hold that the language of nature does all three of these things, with sensory ideas giving us information about other ideas, God, and other finite minds. In this section, I will address each set of texts in turn, and then show how these three types of meaning to be found in the language of nature fit together into a coherent overall picture of the structure and significance of Berkeley's world.

8.6.1 Informing and Instructing about Ideas

The passages in which Berkeley apparently takes the language of nature to be about our sensory ideas (i.e., about itself) are numerous, and may be subdivided into four (overlapping) categories. First, there are those in which he says that visual ideas “suggest and exhibit to us the . . . various qualities of tangible objects . . . just as words suggest the things signified by them” (Alc, §4.10; cf. NTV, §§17, 32, 51, 77, 140).²¹ Second, there is NTV, §143, where Berkeley says that “visible figures represent tangible figures much after the same manner that written words do sounds.” Third, there are those passages in which Berkeley emphasizes that the interpretation of the language of nature allows us to *predict* our future perceptions (NTV, §45; PHK, §65; Alc, §4.7). Fourth and finally, there is the cluster of texts, closely related to and overlapping the third group, in which Berkeley emphasizes that the language of nature gives us *practical instructions* about how to conduct ourselves in the world of sense experience (NTV, §147; PHK, §§65, 109; Alc, §4.7).

Let us begin with the previously promised reconciliation of the first two groups of texts. As indicated above (pp. 338-339), there is an apparent conflict here between Berkeley’s claim that the relation of vision to touch is that of sign to thing signified, and his claim that it is that of written word to sound. This conflict can, however, be resolved by calling attention to a systematic ambiguity which Berkeley says is necessary to “the design of language.” This is the fact that “It is customary to call written words and the things they signify by the same name.” That is, to use Berkeley’s own example, “a tangible square, and the monosyllable consisting of six letters whereby it is marked” are

21. Strictly speaking, not all of the suggesting ideas in these passages are visual. For instance, in NTV, §17, one of the ideas is “the sensation arising from the different turn [the mind] gives the eyes, in order to bring the pupils nearer or farther asunder.”

both named by a single sound (NTV, §140). Note also that the relation here is symmetric: the inscription ‘square’ names both squares and the sound in question. Berkeley’s view, then, would seem to be that visual ideas do indeed name tangible ideas, in the way that spoken words name their written counterparts and *vice versa*. The use of sounds to name inscriptions and *vice versa* is, however, not the *primary* use of words in language. Rather, the primary use occurs at the ‘object level,’ where both ‘square’ and its corresponding sound are used to name squares, and for a variety of other related purposes. In philosophical discourse (including this paragraph), we use quote-names to disambiguate some of these usages, but this convention was not well-established in Berkeley’s day,²² and is still not followed consistently in non-philosophical contexts.

If this is what Berkeley has in mind, then he is *not* committed to the problematic claim, sometimes attributed to him (Mabbott 1931, 26-27; Olscamp 1970b, 32-33; Winkler 1989, 21), that the words of the language of nature signify only other words. Every word of spoken English signifies its written counterpart, and *vice versa*, but this does not mean that English is only about itself.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which at least part of the language of nature clearly *is* about itself, for Berkeley clearly holds that a crucial aspect of the meaningfulness of the language of nature is the way in which “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 to them” (NTV, §147). Berkeley adamantly insists that these things are only ideas and hence that they are part of the language of nature. In this passage, and in most of those where Berkeley addresses this issue, the language of nature is seen as *both* giving instructions

22. Berkeley often marks the use-mention distinction by means of italics, but he is not fully consistent about this, and also sometimes uses italics for other purposes. In Clarke’s edition, from which I quote in this dissertation, italicized words are replaced with quote-names where appropriate.

and providing ‘information.’ Yet both the instructions and the information are apparently about the language itself.

If there was no more to the language of nature than this, then the whole thing would be rather pointless. However, this is *not* all there is, for the language of nature is *also*, and in fact *primarily*, about minds, as I will now proceed to show. Once we have understood God’s talk about minds, we will be in a position to return to the puzzling self-referential nature of the rest of the divine discourse.

8.6.2 Informing about Other Finite Minds

Although some scholars (e.g. Olscamp 1970b, 32; Winkler 1989, 21) have held that all of the ideas in Berkeley’s language of nature signify only other ideas, Berkeley explicitly and repeatedly claims that our ideas of sense signify other minds. Three times in the *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley illustrates the nature of the suggestion relation by discussing the way in which the appearance of a person’s face suggests to us the ‘passions’ he or she is experiencing (NTV, §§9-10, 23, 65), and hence provides information about this other mind. Berkeley insists that these suggestion relations are of the same sort as the suggestion relations between visual ideas and tactile ideas.

The role of these kinds of signs in the language of nature is developed in more detail in the discussion of other minds at the end of the *Principles*:

A human spirit or person is not perceived by sense, as not being an idea. When therefore we see the colour, size, figure, and motions of a man, we perceive only certain sensations or ideas excited in our own minds; and these being exhibited to our view in sundry distinct collections, serve to *mark out unto us* the existence of finite and created spirits like our selves (PHK, §148, emphasis added).

‘Mark out’ is, for Berkeley, a synonym for ‘signify’ (see, e.g., [NTV](#), §140). As if this were not explicit enough, Berkeley goes on to write, in the same section, “one finite and narrow assemblage of ideas *denotes* a particular human mind” ([PHK](#), §148, emphasis added; cf. [Alc](#), §4.5; Pearce [2008](#), 252-253). This is framed as an explanation of Berkeley’s immediately preceding claim that God is better known, and more immediately ‘seen’ than any human person. According to Berkeley, “He [that is, God] alone it is who ‘upholding all things by the Word of his Power’, maintains that intercourse between spirits whereby they are able to perceive the existence of each other” ([PHK](#), §147). Whatever knowledge (or reasonable belief) about other minds we have, we have on the basis of God’s testimony through the language of nature.

However, as Denis Grey observed long ago (Grey [1954](#)), there is an interesting apparent conflict between the discussion in ([PHK](#), §§147-148) and an assertion Berkeley makes not long before it. In this earlier passage, Berkeley says that “we cannot know the existence of other spirits, otherwise than by their operations, or the ideas by them excited in us” (§145). This suggests knowledge, not by arbitrary signification, but rather by *causal inference*. As Grey likewise notes, this parallels two ways Berkeley talks about our knowledge of God. These have come to be known as the ‘passivity argument’ and the ‘divine language argument’ (see Pearce, [forthcoming\[b\]](#), §§1-2).

We shall have more to say about the way in which the divine language informs us about God shortly. However, we should pause here to discuss the relationship between the passivity and divine language arguments in order to show how the apparent conflict identified by Grey is to be resolved.

Berkeley’s passivity argument, upon which we have already had occasion to comment (see above, pp. [167-168](#), [197-199](#), and [245-247](#)), argues from the fact that ideas of sense are passively received to the existence of a foreign agent who is their cause.

We must note, however, just how little this proves. Berkeley's stated conclusion is only "[t]here is therefore some other will or spirit which produces" my ideas of sense (PHK, §29). Berkeley then argues that the *patterns* to be found in my ideas of sense demonstrate "the goodness and wisdom" of the mind that causes them (§32). At the end of the *Principles*, Berkeley makes the stronger claim that

if we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals; I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes, one, eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid spirit, 'who works all in all', and 'by whom all things consist' (§146).

As Ekaterina Ksenjek and Daniel Flage have noted, this description of God is far more religiously adequate than the earlier one, and is in fact closely related to the description found at the beginning of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the doctrinal standard of Berkeley's church (Ksenjek and Flage 2012, 291-292; cf. Pearce, forthcoming[b], §2). All of the features Berkeley here cites are clearly aspects of the divine language, and in fact Berkeley had earlier listed "enlarg[ing] our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator" as one of the aims we ought to have in 'reading' the language of nature (PHK, §109).

In the *Principles*, Berkeley first argues by means of the passivity argument that some mind is the cause of our sensory perceptions (PHK, §§25-30). We then ask the general

question of this chapter, *what is that mind up to?* The answer is that that mind is ‘speaking’ to us (§§31-33, 65, 108-110). In the course of ‘reading’ the discourse which is presented to us, we draw conclusions about the nature of that mind, and see that its attributes match those of the traditional God (§§31-32, 109, 146-150). In Berkeley’s optical writings, he argues that vision is a language without first defending immaterialism, and hence without rejecting ‘second causes.’²³ Berkeley thus evidently believes that the deliverances of the senses can be seen to be a language without the need for prior knowledge of their efficient cause. Nevertheless, in *Alciphron* IV, where Berkeley spells out the inference from his view of the world as a ‘discourse’ to the existence and nature of God, the emphasis is again on the divine attributes, rather than on mere existence.

We will come to this last inference, from the language of nature to the divine attributes shortly. The point I want to make at present is that, contrary to Grey, there is no conflict between the “causal theory of God” and the model of “God as the Divine Interlocutor” (Grey 1954, 29-30), for, after all, a speaker is typically (always?) the cause of her utterance. What is going on with the two arguments of the *Principles* is that we first infer a speaker, and then get to know something about him by interpreting his utterances.

However, Grey’s claim that Berkeley is inconsistent is on much stronger ground in the case of other finite minds. In this case, Berkeley first asserts that we know other minds by means of “the ideas by them excited in us” (PHK, §145) and then, only two sections later, asserts that “in affecting other persons, the will of man has no other object than barely the motion of the limbs of his body; but that such a motion should be attended by, or excite any idea in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the Creator” (PHK, §147). The first passage apparently asserts, and the second apparently denies, that human beings can cause ideas in other human beings. There is clearly a

23. On the rejection of ‘second causes,’ see PHK, §32.

deep tension here. On the other hand, it is deeply implausible to suppose that Berkeley would not notice an explicit contradiction between two texts so close together. It would be better by far if an explanation could be given of how Berkeley understood the two passages just quoted on which they are at least not *obviously* contradictory to one another.

The difficulty we find here is symptomatic of a deep ambivalence in Berkeley's philosophy: his attitude toward occasionalism. Berkeley wants to insist, against Malebranche, that "We move our Legs our Selves" (N, §548). He also wants to defend the claim that the whole sensible world is the product of God's willing. Finally, he wants, of course, to defend the claim that legs are sensible.

We can attribute a consistent view on this matter to Berkeley if we attend to the qualifications he adds to those passages where he insists that we humans are the agents in our bodily movements. In the notebooks passage just quoted, Berkeley goes on to remark, as if by way of explanation, "'tis we that will their [i.e., our legs'] movement" (§548). At PHK, §145, Berkeley says that perception of human bodies in motion informs me of "certain particular agents like myself, which accompany them and concur in their production." Thus my willing the motion of my legs constitutes my *concurrence* in God's production of that motion, and the motion is perceived by others. In the next section, Berkeley confirms this by saying, vaguely, that "there be some things which convince us, human agents are *concerned* in producing them" (§146, emphasis added). Humans do not produce these actions on their own, but by concurrence with God.

Concurrentism about divine and human action is rather a slippery view in early modern philosophy and theology. Generally speaking, this view involves holding that the divine and human wills cooperate in the production of the effect. But how exactly does this 'cooperation' work, in Berkeley's view? In PHK, §147, Berkeley says that "the

will of man has no other object than barely the motion of the limbs of the body.” Given Berkeley’s general theory of action (see above, §6.4), this would seem to mean that what the man *does* is merely move his limbs. This is *contrasted* with “excit[ing an] idea in the mind of another.” This latter event “depends wholly on the will of the Creator.” What this suggests is that my moving my legs can be distinguished from anyone else having any ideas.

What I want to suggest is that my moving my legs consists in a certain kinesthetic sensation experienced solely by me, and that I am the efficient cause of this sensation. What God does is to cause corresponding sensory ideas both in me and in others. Since God causes these ideas in response to my volition to move my leg, I can be said to concur with God in the production of these ideas.

This hypothesis helps to answer our central question about the semantics of the language of nature: the visual perception of the motion of my leg *means* or *signifies* my action of moving my leg. Actions, for Berkeley, just are volitions (see above, §6.4), and volitions cannot be perceived, since they are not ideas nor are they like ideas. Nevertheless, just as “We often see shame or fear in the looks of a man, by perceiving changes of his countenance to red or pale” (NTV, §9), so we often see actions by seeing human bodies in motion. In both cases, this seeing is mediated by the language of nature. This is how Berkeley can insist that God “alone . . . maintains that intercourse between spirits, whereby they are able to perceive the existence of each other” (PHK, §147).

In observing human bodies, I immediately perceive signs which signify actions and passions. Yet, I am aware that these actions and passions are not my own. As a result, if I trust the author of nature, I will conclude that these actions are done, and these passions experienced, by other finite minds like myself. I learn the meaning of these signs from my own case, and extrapolate to others.

We must now briefly address a difficulty in the interpretation of nature about which Berkeley says far too little. This is the status of animals in his system (cf. Pearce 2008, 265-266). The higher animals, at least, exhibit many of the features which lead us to posit minds in the case of humans. Furthermore, Berkeley seems in several places to recognize that animals perceive the world in much the way that we do (NTV, §§24, 59; DHP, 188; Siris, §254). Sébastien Charles has suggested that Berkeley held, as against the Cartesians, that the difference between humans and animals is a matter only of degree (Charles 2010). This is supported by Berkeley's apparent endorsement, throughout *Siris*, of the Neoplatonic Great Chain of Being (cf. Moked 1988, 120-121). However, we should tread carefully here, for there is in Berkeley's philosophy, as in the Cartesian system, a fundamental contrast between active mind and passive body. Berkeley differs from the Cartesians in analyzing body into ideas. The contrast between mind and ideas, however, is clearly, for Berkeley, one of kind rather than merely degree. Thus if Berkeley does endorse the view Charles attributes to him, he will be committed to classifying animals as minds. Furthermore, Berkeley's argument for the natural immortality of the human soul (PHK, §141) would then apparently apply to animals, a result with which he would probably not be pleased (cf. Charles 2010, 190-191, 197-199).

Oddly, despite the fact that Charles' thesis of continuity derives its strongest support from the presence of the Great Chain of Being doctrine in *Siris*, Charles sees Berkeley as relapsing into the Cartesian view of animals as machines in that work. In *Siris*, §257, Berkeley suggests that the intelligence which moves "the systole and diastole of the heart," as well as the diaphragm, may well also be the agent in the habitual actions of humans, and, further, that this intelligence is "the same perhaps which governs bees and spiders, and moves the limbs of those who walk in their sleep." Charles sees this as a return to a Cartesian understanding of animals (Charles 2010, 197).

A few sections earlier, Berkeley drew another contrast between humans and animals: with respect to the language of nature, “A beast is like a man who hears a strange tongue but understands nothing” ([Siris](#), §254).

Note, however, that in both of these passages Berkeley is drawing attention both to similarities as well as differences between humans and animals. Bees and spiders are like humans in engaging in involuntary actions which are nevertheless (in some sense) attributable to them (the sleep walker is the one who walks, although the action is involuntary), but unlike humans in that they do not (apparently) perform truly voluntary actions. ‘Beasts’ more generally are like humans in that they perceive the signs which make up the language of nature, but unlike humans in that they do not understand it.

These passages certainly seem to attribute genuine mental lives to animals and thus, given Berkeley’s general view, to take them to be minds. From the perspective of the language of nature, it is not hard to see why this is so. Much of what we observe in animals seems to be the same as what, in humans, signifies actions and passions. Berkeley’s God seems to be telling us that animals too perform actions and experience passions, though Berkeley claims that lower animals, such as bees and spiders, are not genuine agents with respect to their complex patterns of instinctive behavior.

Does this imply the immortality of animal souls? Not necessarily. Berkeley’s argument for the natural immortality of the soul in [PHK](#), §141 is simply an argument for the conclusion that the soul “is not liable to be broken or dissolved by the ordinary laws of nature or motion.” It is *not* an argument that the soul *actually* persists beyond death (see Pearce, [forthcoming\[b\]](#), §3). Berkeley does elsewhere argue that the actual immortality of human souls is probable independent of revelation ([BW](#), 7:73, 114-115, 181-184; [Alc](#), §6.11).²⁴ These arguments, however, do not appear to apply to animals.

24. For discussion, see Hight [2007a](#).

Thus Berkeley should be seen as holding that animals are genuine minds, and hence immaterial and possibly immortal. However, for animals, unlike humans, we do not have probable reasons either from nature or from revelation, to suppose actual immortality.

8.6.3 Informing about God

In addition to informing us about ideas and other finite minds, Berkeley frequently says that the language of nature informs us about God. In the *Principles*, Berkeley says,

As in reading other books, a wise man will choose to fix his thoughts on the sense and apply it to use . . . so in perusing the volume of nature . . . We should propose to our selves nobler views, such as to recreate and exalt the mind, with a prospect of the beauty, order, extent, and variety of natural things; hence by proper inferences, to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator ([PHK](#), §109).

Similarly, in *Alciphron* we read,

this visual Language proves, not a Creator merely, but a provident Governor actually and intimately present, and attentive to our interests and motions: who watches over our conduct, and takes care of our minutest actions and designs, throughout the whole course of our lives, informing, admonishing, and directing incessantly, in a most evident and sensible manner ([Alc](#), §4.14).

In both the *Principles* and *Alciphron*, Berkeley contrasts the way the language of nature informs us about God with the way it informs us about other finite minds:

[W]hereas some one finite and narrow assemblage of ideas denotes a particular human mind, withersoever we direct our view, we do at all times and in

all places perceive manifest tokens of the divinity, every thing we see, hear, feel, or any wise perceive by sense, being a sign or effect of the power of God, as is our perception of those very motions which are produced by men (PHK, §148; cf. Alc, §4.5).

Everything in nature is a ‘sign or effect’ of God insofar as these ideas may suggest their inferred efficient cause (see above, pp. 167-168). This contrasts with the human case in which there is some specific item in the divine discourse which is used by God to inform us about the human being. In the discussion of the interpretation of the divine discourse in PHK, §109, Berkeley instructs us to look at the discourse *holistically* in order to ‘enlarge our notions’ of God. Berkeley specifically mentions the ‘beauty, order, extent, and variety’ which is to be observed in God’s discourse. Similarly, Euphranor says,

Something there is of divine and admirable in this Language, addressed to our eyes, that may well awaken the mind, and deserves its utmost attention: it is learned with so little pains: it expresses the differences of things so clearly and aptly: it instructs with such facility and dispatch, by one glance of the eye conveying a greater variety of advices, and a more distinct knowledge of things, than could be got by a discourse of several hours. And while it informs, it amuses and entertains the mind with such singular pleasure and delight (Alc, §4.15).

Berkeley emphasizes the overall character of the discourse as allowing us to make inferences about God. What this suggests is that this information about God may not be part of the semantic content of the discourse at all. Rather, we gain knowledge of God in the way that one may gain knowledge of an author by reading her novel, even if no part of the novel is autobiographical. What a speaker or writer says or writes conveys a great

deal of information about the speaker or writer, even if he is not explicitly talking or writing about himself.²⁵ This is the case to an even greater degree with God's "coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse" ([Siris](#), §254), for God is not only the author of the discourse, but also the designer of the language in which it takes place.

8.6.4 The Interpretation of the Discourse of Nature

What is God's discourse about, and what is its purpose? The greater part of God's discourse lacks direct extra-linguistic reference. Using either commonsense or Newtonian laws, I parse my visual impression of fire, and this parsing allows me to interpret it in order to make a variety of predictions. These predictions constitute the meaning or content conveyed by this 'sentence' of the language. *Like most of English*, most of the divine language consists in pure 'inference tickets' which do not make direct contact with anything extra-linguistic. This is what the allegedly problematic self-referential character of Berkeley's language of nature amounts to. However, we can now see that this is not problematic at all for, given Berkeley's account of language, this is a *similarity with*, and not a difference from, human languages.

Perhaps, however, it will be thought that this only pushes the problem back a step. As I have noted repeatedly, if a discourse is to be genuinely meaningful, and so truth-apt, rather than being a mere notation game, it must make at least indirect contact with something outside it. In terms of Euphranor's poker chip analogy ([Alc](#), §7.8), it is necessary that the chips be purchased at the beginning and cashed in at the end. It is the money that the poker chips are 'about.' Similarly, arithmetic is about collections of

25. Perhaps J. D. Mabbott has something like this in mind when he suggests that we may be able to understand how the divine language informs about God "by distinguishing what words *express* from what they *evince*" (Mabbott [1931](#), 27).

things, ‘force’ talk is about motion, and ‘body’ talk is about sensible ideas. What is the discourse of nature *about*?

There is an easy answer to this question: the discourse is about finite minds. Note that my perception of the fire tells me not only what *I* would perceive in certain circumstances; it also tells me what *anyone else* would perceive in those same circumstances. These inferences in turn connect to all sorts of claims I can make about other finite minds.

Here we get exactly the conclusion Berkeley would want about the question of truth and falsehood in the discourse of nature: the language God speaks is perfectly capable of expressing falsehoods, for God could easily tell me things about other minds which are not so. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that God ever actually *does* assert falsehoods. In fact, insofar as God has always been truthful in informing me about my future experience (when I have interpreted him correctly), and insofar as God’s dealings with me have exhibited benevolence thus far,²⁶ I have reason to suppose just the contrary.

Furthermore, we get just the view about the relative status of belief in God and belief in other finite minds Berkeley wants: belief in God is prior to, and more secure than, belief in other minds (PHK, §§145-149), since our belief in other minds can be justified only on the basis of divine testimony.

Finally, we should ask, what is the *point* of this divine discourse? Simply informing me about other finite minds is surely part of God’s aim. However, this is not an adequate

26. It should be noted here that the degree to which God has exhibited benevolence is certainly open to question, since Berkeley’s response to the problem of evil (PHK, §§151-153) is quite lame. More generally, Berkeley appears to overplay his hand in his attempt to infer the ‘full-strength’ traditional divine attributes from his theory. Nevertheless, I think it is safe to say that the experience of most people – those who have not experienced ‘horrendous evils’ in the sense of M. M. Adams 1989 – tends, given the rest of Berkeley’s system, to support the contention that God is very wise and powerful and at least somewhat benevolently disposed toward us. See Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §2.

explanation of what is going on, for much of the information God gives me is counterfactual in nature (what *would* happen to minds *if* they did such and such), and much of it is a matter of what God is saying or would say to me or to others. In short, it is not clear what purpose is served by the quasi-referring terms (i.e., inanimate bodies) in the language. Insofar as they connect to minds, they have some meaning, but it is not clear why God has adopted this form of expression.

One of God's aims is, it seems, to "maintain . . . intercourse between spirits" (PHK, §147), that is, as I have previously expressed the matter, to "create a linguistic context for meaningful interaction between minds" (Pearce 2008, 263). Many words in human language – greetings, for instance – serve this kind of purpose: they do not convey specific information, but rather are useful because of the purpose they serve in structuring social interactions.

Beyond this, Berkeley often emphasizes the beauty of the discourse, and the emotions it inspires, as among God's aims in speaking this discourse (PHK, §109; Alc, §4.15). This lends credence to James Danaher's contention that God's discourse is really more like a *poem* (Danaher 2002, 370-372). This poetry recitation, of which we are all auditors, is primarily about *us* – the finite minds. Nevertheless, God's recitation is in part a self-disclosure. It puts us in contact with the divine as well as with one another.

8.7 Conclusion: From Fleeting Ideas to Robust Structure

The structure of Berkeley's world is a linguistic structure. It has a phonology which consists in sensible qualities, and this is the underlying reality our quality talk aims to capture. It has, further, a lexicography, whereby the qualities are grouped into larger

meaningful units. It is this grouping into units which our body talk aims to capture. The divine language also has a syntax. The syntax consists in certain linguistic relations which different words (objects) bear to each other, and our talk about causes, forces, and so forth aims to capture this. Talking *about* this kind of structure involves constructing a model, and there may be more than one equally correct way to do this. Finally, once we have correctly parsed the structure of our experience, we are able to *interpret* it. On doing so, we find that it is a great ‘discourse’ *about us*. (It is, indeed, by this interpretation that I discover that there is an ‘us’ and not merely a ‘me.’) This discourse is “coherent, entertaining, and instructive” ([Siris](#), §254), as well as beautiful. These attributes of the discourse, Berkeley believes, reveal to us that it is ‘spoken’ by a single wise, powerful, and benevolent mind, namely, God.

Chapter 9

Skepticism and Unperceived Objects

One of Berkeley's main philosophical aims is to provide an adequate response to external world skepticism. This skepticism comes in two varieties: skepticism about the *existence* of bodies, and skepticism about the *nature* of bodies (Pappas 2000, 235-238). From Berkeley's perspective, in order for a response to be adequate, it must have the consequence that, skeptical scenarios notwithstanding, the gardener knows most of the things he is inclined to assert about his cherry tree (DHP, 234). This means both that commonsense beliefs about familiar objects must be *true*, and that these beliefs must be *justified* without appeal to sophisticated philosophical arguments.

These two claims are in tension. Berkeley's solution to the problem of justification, his phenomenalism, appears to entail that bodies cannot exist unperceived and, therefore, that a great many of the gardener's beliefs are false. Berkeley attempts to avoid this conclusion by means of two apparently distinct strategies, one based on subjunctive conditionals about human perceptions, and one based on divine ideas. However, these two strategies appear to be inconsistent with one another and with Berkeley's response to the justification problem. In this chapter, I argue that the interpretation of Berkeley's language of nature theory advocated in chapter 8 provides Berkeley with the resources to resolve the apparent contradictions. The subjunctive conditionals of the first strategy are to be interpreted as stating that such-and-such perception must occur in so-and-so circumstances *according to the rules of the language God is speaking*, and the divine

ideas of the second strategy are to be identified with the lexicon of the language. However, as I argued in chapter 5, Berkeley recognizes that the rules of a language must be a matter of convention, and therefore cannot be merely a matter of private speaker intentions. God cannot change the facts about the language without changing what he says. On the present interpretation, this is equivalent to saying that God cannot change the facts about the world, including about unperceived objects, without changing the perceptions he gives us. Thus this interpretation, while allowing for unperceived objects, takes the *esse is percipi* doctrine quite seriously, by reducing the facts about sensible objects, including those not actually sensed, to the facts about actual human perceptions. As a result, it is able to preserve Berkeley's claim that those who naively believe their senses thereby gain genuine knowledge of the world.

The first section of this chapter will be concerned with Berkeley's understanding of the skeptical problem, and the desiderata for an adequate solution. The second section will address the well-known problems regarding unperceived objects which Berkeley faces, and relate these problems to the skeptical worries. Section three will expound and defend my interpretation of Berkeley's account of unperceived objects. The fourth and final section will show how this account resolves the tensions and allows Berkeley to answer the skeptic.

9.1 'In Opposition to Sceptics'

Berkeley's early works were written, he tells us, 'in opposition to sceptics and atheists' (DHP, subtitle). In chapters 1 and 2, I argued that, in his criticism of the Theory of Meanings, Berkeley regards Locke as only the latest and greatest exemplar of a long, venerable, and fundamentally mistaken tradition. Contrary to the assumptions of many interpreters, Berkeley is not focused on Locke alone. Rather, he is aware of this broader

tradition, and his sloppiness about the details of Locke's view is due to the fact that his aim is not to attack Locke on these details, but to attack the foundations of the entire tradition. If the foundations are undermined, the details of the superstructure become irrelevant.

The same is true in Berkeley's treatment of skepticism.¹ Here, Descartes looms almost as large as Locke, but Berkeley is not concerned with the details of either Descartes's or Locke's skeptical views; his aim is not to solve particular skeptical problems raised by Descartes or Locke, but to refute the fundamental assumption which makes external world skepticism possible. This is what I call the *Independence Assumption*: the view that the facts about the world and the facts about my perception can vary independently. This is not a distinctively Cartesian or Lockean assumption; it is one of "the common principles of philosophers" (DHP, 167). It is by undermining this widely held assumption that Berkeley believes he can defend the gardener's knowledge of his cherry tree.

9.1.1 Berkeley's Skeptical Opponents

In his notebooks, there are four philosophers Berkeley associates with skepticism by name: Descartes (N, §794), Malebranche (§§257, 686-686a, 800),² Fardella (§79), and Locke (§80). By examining the basis for Berkeley's attribution of skepticism to each of these four authors, we can gain a clearer picture of Berkeley's understanding of the

1. In the case of skepticism, however, the importance of other targets has been more widely recognized by commentators. See, e.g., Wilson 1985, 132n3; Pappas 2000, 236; 2007, 30, 40.

2. Malebranche may also be the 'Cartesian' of N, §§477-477a.

skeptical problem. Descartes and his followers, Malebranche and Fardella, are associated primarily with skepticism about the *existence* of bodies, while Locke is associated primarily with skepticism about the *nature* of bodies.³

Descartes

Descartes's famous 'method of doubt' is meant to benefit us by "freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses," with the result that it will be "impossible for us to have any further doubts about what we subsequently discover to be true" (CSM, 2:9). The basic strategy is to call into doubt the deliverances of the senses in order to lead the meditator to the true source of certain knowledge, the faculty of pure reason. To this end, long before he attempts to establish the existence of body, Descartes offers an extensive argument for the claim that, even if the senses are reliable, they at best inform us of the *qualities* of body; the body itself, what Locke would call the 'material substratum,' is known by the intellect alone (2:20-22). When we understand body by the pure intellect we grasp its : extension. Because the essence of body is extension, body is, as Descartes repeats four times in the *Meditations*, "the subject-matter of pure mathematics" (2:49, 50, 51, 55), that is, of geometry (1:129). Bodies, for Descartes, are simply concrete instantiations of geometrical natures such as triangularity.

For Descartes, fundamental physics is simply a matter of geometry, and thus proceeds entirely *a priori*. It does not, however, follow from this that the entire enterprise of natural philosophy can proceed without the aid of the senses. In order to know that there actually *are* any bodies, the meditator must prove the veracity of the senses, which is meant to follow from the veracity of God (2:53-56). By the pure intellect, we know

3. Cf. Nadler 1989, 134-135.

the nature of body. By understanding this nature, we can determine which bodies are *possible*. It is, however, only by the senses that we can know which bodies are *actual*. Thus an individual in the deceiving demon scenario would, according to Descartes, have knowledge of the *nature* of body, but lack knowledge of the *existence* of body.

For Descartes, the role of the senses in our knowledge of the external world is to inform us of which particular geometrical natures, among all the infinitely many possibilities, are actually instantiated. It is Descartes's view that our senses are singularly ill-suited to the task. This is so, despite divine veracity, because "the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful." The sense are not meant to be "reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us" (CSM, 2:57-58). The 'God is not a deceiver' principle, Descartes insists, does not guarantee the impossibility of error, but only the "impossibility of there being any falsity in my opinions *which cannot be corrected by some other faculty*" (2:55-56, emphasis added).

For purposes of their use in natural philosophy, the senses require constant correction by the pure intellect. Most importantly, if I use my senses without correction, I will be led to believe

that the heat in a body is something exactly resembling the idea of heat which is in me; or that when a body is white or green, the selfsame whiteness or greenness which I perceive through my senses is present in the body; or that in a body which is bitter or sweet there is the selfsame taste which I experience, and so on (2:56-57).

By the exercise of the pure intellect, we can see that the only properties bodies in fact instantiate are geometrical ones. Thus even in very ordinary cases, cases which, pre-philosophically, we are not at all tempted to classify as perceptual illusions, the senses are systematically misleading as to the objective facts about the world.

When philosophers speak of ‘Cartesian skepticism,’ they typically mean to refer to some position which is held by the meditator relatively early in the course of the *Meditations*, perhaps at the end of the First or Second Meditation. Insofar as such a position is attributed to Descartes, it is attributed to him by implication, because it is believed that he ultimately fails to dig himself out of his hole. Berkeley does at least sometimes seem to characterize the situation in just this way. For instance, Berkeley writes in his notebooks, “Ask a man [I mean a Cartesian]⁴ why he supposes this vast Structure, this compages of Bodies. & he shall be at a Stand, he’ll not have one word to say” (N, §477).

The Cartesian strategy for escaping skepticism depends, as has been observed, on departing from the senses in favor of the pure intellect. At one point in the *Dialogues*, Hylas attempts this strategy. Philonous has just been arguing that we cannot get the idea of ‘pure extension’ (without color) by abstracting it from the ideas of particular bodies. Hylas suggests that perhaps we can get such an idea by the faculty of pure intellect. Philonous responds:

not to inquire into the nature of pure intellect and its spiritual objects, as virtue, reason, God, or the like, thus much seems manifest, that sensible things are only to be perceived by sense or represented by the imagination.

4. Inserted above a caret.

Figures, therefore, and extension, being originally perceived by sense, do not belong to pure intellect (DHP, 193-194).⁵

It is interesting that Berkeley the empiricist does not here deny the existence of a faculty of pure intellect.⁶ Instead, he claims that it is simply obvious that bodies are to be known, if at all, only by the senses. This is a flat rejection of Descartes's strategy for securing knowledge of the nature of bodies.

Although Berkeley never says so, it is likely that he also thought that Descartes's strategy for securing knowledge of the existence of bodies failed. On Berkeley's view, it is only by examining the order of nature that we can know that the cause of our perceptions, God, is wise and benevolent (PHK, §§109, 146-156).⁷ Descartes, however, must establish divine benevolence *a priori* if he is to establish the existence of external objects.

Berkeley, then, like many other commentators, thought that Descartes was implicitly committed to skepticism on account of the failure of his anti-skeptical strategy. However, Berkeley goes farther than this: he holds that Descartes's stated final position in the *Meditations*, even if every one of his arguments is successful, is *still* objectionably skeptical.

The objectionable features of Descartes's final position are two: first, Descartes is still excessively distrustful of the senses and, second, insofar as Descartes *does* trust the senses, he does so on the basis of arguments far too sophisticated for Berkeley's gardener to grasp. The first feature guarantees that the gardener is mistaken in many of his judgments, such as his judgment that the cherry is (really) red. The second feature

5. Berkeley makes very similar remarks at CGB, 67-70. See Jesseph 1993, 32-33.

6. In fact, he seems to endorse the existence of such a faculty at DM, §53. For discussion, see Roberts 2007, 36-38; Jacovides 2009, 424. Berkeley does, however, reject pure intellect at N, §810.

7. On this argument, see above, §§8.6.3-8.6.4, and also Pearce, forthcoming(b), §2.

is even more destructive, for, given that the senses need the kind of support from the pure intellect that Descartes thinks they do, it seems that the gardener could be justified in trusting his senses only if he actually grasped Descartes's argument. The gardener's failure to grasp the argument therefore prevents him from having any empirical knowledge at all. Even if the meditator has escaped from skepticism, she has not rescued the gardener.

Throughout both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues*, Berkeley treats distrust of the senses as the hallmark of skepticism (PHK, §§40, 101; DHP, 167, 173, 211, 237, 244-245), and in his notebooks, he explicitly associates this distrust with Descartes's position "in the last par. of ye last Med" and reminds himself "effectually to confute" it (N, §794). The trust of the senses Berkeley seeks to defend involves the rejection of standard mechanistic accounts of the so-called 'secondary qualities.' As Philonous says, "I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them ... It is ... my opinion that colours and other sensible qualities are on the objects" (DHP, 229-230).⁸ This is, of course, a result of Berkeley's privileging the manifest image over the scientific image (see above, §8.5). The rejection of the manifest image is objectionably skeptical because it implies that the common (scientifically uneducated) person is radically mistaken about the natures of the objects she sees and feels.

In this passage, and throughout his writings, Berkeley assumes that mechanism is an *eliminative* rather than *reductive* program. If the primary or only target is Locke, then this characterization is unfair; Locke's view is that all simple ideas, including secondary quality ideas, are 'real' and 'adequate' (EHU, §§2.30.2, 2.31.2), and therefore accurately

8. Or, as Berkeley puts it elsewhere, "there are [some] who Say the Wall is not white, the fire is not hot &c We Irish men cannot attain to these truths" (N, §392).

represent the properties of objects.⁹ Lockean mechanism is thus a *reduction* of the secondary qualities of bodies; it seeks to tell us what these qualities *really are*, and it tells us that they are dispositions grounded in mechanical constitutions. Descartes's Sixth Meditation, by contrast, treats secondary qualities in the context of the problem of perceptual error.¹⁰ Descartes's view is that if we treat the senses "as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential natures of the bodies located outside us," we will attribute secondary qualities to bodies, and we will be mistaken.¹¹ This is not to say that Descartes is an eliminativist about secondary qualities, for he certainly believes in, e.g., color sensations. Descartes is, however, an eliminativist about *the attribution of secondary qualities to bodies*. Contrary to Locke, who holds that such attributions can be analyzed in mechanistically respectable terms, Descartes holds that such attributions are simply false.¹² Berkeley regards this as skeptical distrust of the senses.¹³

9. This complaint against Berkeley is made by Bennett 1971, §§24-25, esp. pp. 119-120. Throughout his discussion of secondary qualities, Bennett consistently assumes that Locke is the only target, despite the fact that his discussion begins (p. 89) by listing Descartes, Boyle, and Newton as other sources for the primary/secondary quality distinction. I agree rather with Samuel Rickless who says that, in his discussion of secondary qualities, "Berkeley is referring to the Cartesians (and possibly also, albeit erroneously, to the Lockes)" (Rickless 2013, 124). Berkeley's criticisms are criticisms of the Galileo-Descartes theory of secondary qualities. *Perhaps* he thinks his criticisms can be adapted for use against the Boyle-Locke theory, but if so, he hasn't told us how. As we will see below, Berkeley's grounds for regarding Locke's position as objectionably skeptical do not rest on any particular understanding of secondary qualities.

10. However, in at least one place in the *Optics*, a text with which Berkeley was familiar (NTV, §4), Descartes seems to adopt a reductive view similar to Locke's (CSM, 1:153). On Descartes's ambivalence on this point, see Cottingham 1989-1990.

11. Cf. Galileo: "many properties, which are considered to be qualities inherent in external objects, do not really have any other existence except in us, and ... outside of us they are nothing but names" (Galilei [1623] 2008, 188). The impression that the secondary qualities of bodies are being eliminated is strengthened by Galileo's comparison of heat to tickling in the same passage. For discussion of Galileo's view see Redondi 1987, 55-57, 63.

12. On the contrast between the Galileo-Descartes theory and the Boyle-Locke theory, see McCann 1994, 62-63.

13. Wilson 1982, 114-116 gives an additional reason for supposing that at least some of Berkeley's criticisms of the primary-secondary quality distinction are directed at targets other than Locke. Wilson notes that Berkeley's perceptual relativity argument against the distinction (PHK, §§14-15; DHP, 187-191) appears to have been drawn from Pierre Bayle, who says that he got it from Simon Foucher. The work

The second objectionably skeptical feature of Descartes's supposedly anti-skeptical conclusion is the view that one can only get to this anti-skeptical conclusion by means of sophisticated philosophical arguments. One must, according to Descartes, establish the reliability of the senses by establishing the existence of a non-deceiving God; the latter claim is (allegedly) established only by arguments like the 'objective reality' argument of the Third Meditation, an argument sure to baffle gardeners and undergraduates alike.

Philonous clearly has Descartes in mind when he exclaims "What a jest is it for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things, till he has it proved to him from the veracity of God; . . . I might as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things I actually see and feel" (DHP, 230).¹⁴ Descartes's supposed solution to the skeptical problem he raised cannot be accepted because it is only half of a solution for the meditator, and no solution at all for the gardener.

Malebranche

Malebranche is the only philosopher to be mentioned by name as a skeptic in Berkeley's major published works (DHP, 214 [1734 ed.]). This is not at all surprising, first because Berkeley's views were often confused with those of Malebranche (Bracken 1965), and second, because Malebranche is a hyper-Cartesian in all of the worst ways. Near the beginning of the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, Malebranche's spokesman Theodore tells the novice Aristes,

I shall teach you that the world you live in is not as you believe it to be, because actually it is not the way you see or sense it . . . [Y]our senses beguile

of Foucher in question was a critique of Malebranche published in 1675, 15 years before the publication of Locke's *Essay*.

14. In the ellipsis, the target switches to Locke; see below.

you infinitely more than you can imagine. They are faithful witnesses only in respect of what concerns the good of the body and the preservation of life. As for everything else, there is no precision, no truth in their testimony . . . Reason must always remain in charge in our discussion (Malebranche [1688] 1997, 4).

Malebranche's goal is that "the mind may be led away from the senses" in a much stronger sense than Descartes intended that phrase; in doing philosophy, we are not to trust the senses at all. They will always 'beguile' us. Furthermore, while Descartes ends with a qualified defense of the senses, acknowledging that they are our source of information for the actual existence of bodies, Malebranche denies that we can know the existence of bodies by natural reason at all. Malebranche argues explicitly that Descartes's argument for the existence of bodies from divine veracity fails and holds instead that natural reason can at best provide probable arguments for the existence of bodies; certainty can come only through divine revelation (Malebranche [1674–1675] 1997, Elucidation Six; [1688] 1997, §§6.4-6.8).

Malebranche is explicitly skeptical about the existence of bodies: he holds that there is no knowledge of their existence by natural reason. Furthermore, Malebranche's defense of our knowledge of the nature of body is the same as Descartes's in all relevant respects,¹⁵ and so will fail, according to Berkeley, for the same reasons. Finally, Malebranche is quite explicit about his distrust of the senses, which Berkeley takes to be the hallmark of skepticism.

15. In fact, Malebranche's approach is worse than Descartes's because it runs into the theological error of 'enthusiasm' by supposing that the pure intellect can see into the mind of God (DHP, 213-214 [1734 ed.]). On Malebranche's 'enthusiasm,' see Jolley 2003.

Fardella

Michelangelo Fardella (c. 1646-1718) is by far the most obscure of the philosophers Berkeley mentions. In fact, Ian Tipton suggests that even Berkeley himself may have known about Fardella and his views only from a comment by Bayle (Tipton 1974, 52). If Malebranche is a hyper-Cartesian, Fardella is a hyper-Malebranchean. Like Malebranche, Fardella held that we could have certainty about the existence of material objects only by supernatural revelation. However, Fardella went farther than Malebranche by denying that natural reason could provide even probable arguments in favor of the existence of bodies (Floridi 1998). Again, natural knowledge of the existence of bodies is denied, natural knowledge of the nature of bodies is unsuccessfully defended, and the senses are distrusted.

Locke

Locke's relation to skepticism is entirely different from the Cartesians'. Locke does not adopt the method of doubt and, indeed, does not take Descartes's skeptical scenarios at all seriously. Locke's stated aim in the *Essay* was to "find out, how far the Understanding can extend its view; how far it has Faculties to attain Certainty; and in what Cases it can only judge and guess" (EHU, §1.1.4). This inquiry was necessary, Locke thought, because so long as we "let loose our Thoughts into the vast Ocean of *Being*, as if all that boundless Extent, were the natural, and undoubted Possession of our Understandings" we could never attain to "a quiet and secure Possession of Truths, that most concern'd us" (§1.1.7). The target here is most likely Malebranche (see, e.g., Malebranche [1674–1675] 1997, 232). Locke's view is that an overly optimistic estimate of our faculties prevents us from using them properly within their limited domain. He therefore aims to undermine these overly optimistic views.

This has obvious implications for Berkeley's attitude toward Locke. As we have seen Berkeley held that Descartes and Malebranche were excessively skeptical, not just in their starting points, but even in their final positions. These very positions are the ones which Locke takes to be *not skeptical enough*. Thus it is not unexpected that, in Berkeley's anti-skeptical polemics, while Descartes, Malebranche, and Fardella form important parts of the background, Locke is, for the most part, front and center.¹⁶

Locke, according to Berkeley, is a skeptic both explicitly and by implication. Locke is explicitly a radical nature skeptic, holding that the 'real essences' of bodies are entirely unknown to us, and he is explicitly a moderate existence skeptic, holding that our knowledge of bodies belongs to a special category, 'sensitive knowledge,' which carries a lesser degree of certainty than other sorts of knowledge, such as the 'intuitive' knowledge of our own existence. Furthermore, Locke is, by implication, a radical existence skeptic, since he is unable to give an adequate response to Descartes's deceiving demon scenario. I will discuss each of these forms of skepticism in turn.

Locke famously distinguished between the *real* and *nominal* essences of substances. The nominal essence of a substance is the complex, abstract idea which is the meaning of the name of that substance, and is composed of the various marks by which we distinguish that sort of substance from others. The real essence is "that real Constitution ... upon which depends this *nominal Essence*, and all the Properties of that Sort" (EHU, §3.6.2). That is, the real essence is the microphysical structure which gives rise to the qualities which we use to classify objects (§§2.31.6, 3.6.6-7). These real essences are entirely unknown to us (§3.6.9). God simply never intended for us to penetrate into the natures of things:

16. In this chapter I am concerned exclusively with skepticism about the existence and nature of bodies; interestingly, Berkeley does not object to Locke's modest (some would say skeptical) epistemology of religion, which was the focus of most of Locke's other early critics. See Pearce, [forthcoming\(a\)](#).

though the *Comprehension* of our Understandings, comes exceeding short of the vast Extent of Things ... it yet secures [our] great Concernments, that [we] have Light enough to lead [us] to the Knowledge of [our] Maker, and the sight of [our] own Duties (EHU, §1.1.5).

Locke, like the Cartesians, holds that our senses and passions were intended by God only to guide our practice, and not to give us knowledge of the secrets of the universe. However, unlike the Cartesians, Locke denies that we have any other source of knowledge. The natures of things are, therefore, simply unknown to us.

Berkeley makes it quite clear that one of his main aims is to refute Locke's doctrine "that we are under an invincible blindness as to the true and real natures of things" (PHK, §101; cf. PHK, Intro §2; DHP, 227-230). Hylas's Lockean profession that he is "ignorant of the true nature of everything" forms a part of what Philonous calls "the deepest and most deplorable scepticism" (DHP, 229).

Locke's second skeptical doctrine is his theory of 'sensitive knowledge.' Locke had distinguished between three 'degrees' of knowledge: intuitive, demonstrative, and sensitive. Intuitive knowledge occurs when we immediately perceive the agreement or disagreement of two ideas and, since our ideas are transparent to us, carries the highest degree of certainty (EHU, §4.2.1). Demonstrative knowledge occurs when we use a series of one or more 'intervening ideas' to see the agreement or disagreement of two ideas, that is, when some process of reasoning is required (§4.2.2). Finally, sensitive knowledge is a 'second class' sort of knowledge by which we know, by means of the senses, of the existence of external objects. Locke says that sensitive knowledge "passes under the name of knowledge" despite being less certain than intuitive or demonstrative knowledge (§4.2.14).

Berkeley strongly objects to Locke's claim that our knowledge of the existence of bodies is in any way 'second class' (N, §80).¹⁷ Instead, he holds that knowledge of bodies is intuitive, having the same status as the *cogito* (PHK, §88; DHP, 230).¹⁸

What Locke here admits is a moderate sort of existence skepticism. Although Locke is somewhat ambivalent on the appropriateness of calling sensitive knowledge 'knowledge' (EHU, §§4.2.14, 4.11.3), he consistently insists that by our senses "we are provided with an Evidence, that puts us past doubting" (§4.2.14). Thus whether or not our assent to the existence of bodies is genuine knowledge or mere belief, it is both (as a matter of psychological strength) firm and (as a matter of rationality) well-grounded. However, Berkeley holds that Locke is guilty, by implication, of a more radical sort of skepticism insofar as his theory does not entitle him to these claims.

Locke is extremely dismissive of the radical existence skepticism of Descartes's First Meditation. He writes,

If any one say, a Dream may do the same thing [as waking sensory perception], and all these *Ideas* may be produced in us, without any external Objects, he may please to dream that I make him this Answer, 1. That 'tis no great matter, whether I remove his Scruple, or no: Where all is but Dream, Reasoning and Arguments are of no use, Truth and Knowledge nothing. 2. That I believe he will allow a very manifest difference between dreaming of being in the Fire, and being actually in it (§4.2.14).¹⁹

17. Pappas 2007 criticizes Berkeley for assuming, mistakenly, that Lockean sensitive knowledge is inferential. Pappas is, however, mistaken. Instead, Berkeley holds, correctly, that sensitive knowledge is, for Locke, 'second class' as compared to intuitive or demonstrative knowledge. If, therefore, knowledge of bodies is to be 'first class,' it must be either intuitive or demonstrative. However Locke himself admits that his theory simply cannot permit this (EHU, §§4.11.1-3). See below, §9.1.3.

18. Locke classifies the *cogito* as intuitive knowledge at §4.9.3.

19. Cf. §4.11.3: "he that can doubt so far ... will never have any Controversie with me; since he can never be sure I say any thing contrary to his Opinion."

Berkeley clearly has this passage in mind when he writes:

it will be objected [to immaterialism] that there is a great difference betwixt real fire, for instance, and the idea of fire, betwixt imagining one's self burnt, and actually being so . . . [but] if fire be very different from the idea of fire, so also is the real pain that it occasions very different from the idea of the same pain. And yet no body will pretend that real pain either is, or can possibly be, in an unperceiving thing or without the mind, any more than its idea. (PHK, §41)

In other words, the considerations adduced by Locke show that ordinary use of the words 'real' and 'imaginary' succeeds in distinguishing two different sorts of experiences (see above, §6.6). But what is the difference between these experiences? As Philonous observes, since we successfully draw the distinction, it must be that we draw it on the basis of a *perceived* difference (DHP, 235). What reason could there be for supposing that experiences of the one sort correspond to mind-independent objects, and experiences of the other sort do not?

As Berkeley notes, Locke and Descartes give essentially the same answer to this question: "sometimes we see feel &c against our will" (N, §790).²⁰ Berkeley agrees that this is the basis for the plain language distinction between the real and the imaginary, and also that it gives me good reason to suppose that the perceptions I call 'real' have a cause other than myself (PHK, §§29-33). What Berkeley denies is that it is coherent to suppose that "any idea or sensation [could] . . . be produced by, anything but a mind or spirit" (DHP, 215), or that the cause of my perceptions could in any way resemble those perceptions (PHK, §8). Locke needs, somehow, to get from the premise that each of my

20. Berkeley cites "Locke in his 4th book & Descartes in Med. 6." The passages he has in mind are probably EHU, §4.11.5 and CSM, 2:52, respectively.

sensory perceptions has a cause distinct from myself to the conclusion that the sensory perceptions which we group together and regard as perceptions of a single object have a single cause, distinct from the cause of the perceptions we regard as perceptions of other objects, and that these causes resemble the perceptions in certain respects. This Locke has not even attempted. Instead, he simply ridicules those who are concerned about the problem. However, (*pace* Reid 1786, 2:252-254) ridicule lacks justificatory force (see Alc, §3.15). As a result, Locke, like the Cartesians, fails to escape from the radical existence skepticism of the First Meditation.

9.1.2 Adequate Solutions

When the preceding survey of Berkeley's skeptical opponents is brought to bear on the early portions of the Introduction to the *Principles*, as well as the Preface to the *Dialogues*, a clear picture of Berkeley's anti-skeptical project emerges. Berkeley begins the Introduction to the *Principles*, by observing that, while "the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature ... are out of all danger of becoming sceptics," skepticism arises as soon as "we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things" (PHK, Intro §1).

Berkeley rightly observes that

the cause of [our lack of knowledge] is thought [by his opponents] to be the obscurity of things, or the natural weakness of our understandings. It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitutions of things (Intro §2).

As we have seen, both Locke and the Cartesians endorse the view that the purpose for which God created the senses was to guide us in the ordinary conduct of our lives and, therefore, that it is not contrary to divine benevolence that our senses should frequently mislead us when we attempt to apply them to matters far removed from practice. Berkeley, however, is having none of it: “We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men, than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge, which he has placed quite out of their reach” (PHK, Intro §3). Philosophy itself is the true cause of skepticism: “we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see” (Intro §3). Berkeley then announces that his aim will be to discover and refute the fundamental assumption which leads to this skepticism (Intro §4). By this means, Berkeley hopes to show that the ‘illiterate bulk’ were right all along, and so to bring those who find themselves “wander[ing] through the wild mazes of philosophy” safely home to “the simple dictates of nature,” by which he means, primarily, trust in the senses (DHP, 168).

In the *Dialogues*, the gardener needs no rescue; he is, indeed, ‘out of all danger.’ There is nothing wrong with his epistemic practice, the practice of believing in cherry trees when he sees and feels them, and not believing in orange trees when he doesn’t see and feel them (234). This despite the fact that the gardener has no sophisticated philosophical or scientific theories about minds, cherry trees, or the relations between them. Philonous similarly ‘walks the high-road of plain common sense:’ “I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them” (229). It is Hylas, and Hylas only, who has lost himself in the ‘wild mazes of philosophy.’ By listening to the philosophers, Hylas has ended up “being ignorant of what everybody else knows perfectly well” (229). Philonous’s task is to bring him safely home.

The skeptical problem, for Berkeley, is not a problem for human knowledge; it is a problem for philosophers. Human knowledge gets along just fine without any solution to the skeptical problem. Nature dictates trust in the senses; the non-philosopher obeys and gains knowledge of the existence and nature of tables, chairs, and cherry trees. The philosopher, on the other hand, believes she has discovered “uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies” (PHK, Intro §1) in this procedure of trusting the senses. The Cartesians therefore seek to call us away from the senses to another, more trustworthy source of knowledge. Locke, finding no such source “sit[s] down in a forlorn scepticism” (Intro §1).²¹ Berkeley’s anti-skeptical aim is to find the wrong turn these philosophers made, so that he can lead them out of the wild mazes and safely back to the high-road.²²

An adequate solution to the skeptical problem must show that naive trust in the senses results in certain knowledge of both the existence and the nature of bodies. The particular solution Berkeley proposes is, of course, his phenomenalism, his view that the being of bodies consists in their being perceived. ‘Being’ here encompasses both existence and predication: for a body to exist is for it to be perceived, and for a body to be *F* is for it to be perceived as *F* (PHK, §25; cf. *Siris*, §292). Sensory perception, therefore, *necessarily* provides accurate information about both the existence and the nature of bodies.

21. This may be a reference to EHU, §1.1.4, where Locke says that once we have charted the boundaries of human understanding we will be able “to sit down in a quiet Ignorance of those Things, which, upon Examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our Capacities.” Berman 2010, 150-151 also draws this connection.

22. For a similar characterization of Berkeley’s anti-skeptical project, see Bordner 2011.

9.1.3 The Demon Game and the Independence Assumption

It is now time to pull these threads together into a precise account of the skeptical problem and Berkeley's strategy for responding to it.

The skeptical scenario with which Berkeley is concerned can be cast in the form of a game. There are two players, the demon and the meditator. We consider two sorts of facts: facts about the meditator's perceptions, and facts about familiar objects. The facts about the meditator's perceptions are facts about how things seem or appear to her. The facts about familiar objects are facts about the existence (or non-existence), nature, and distribution of the objects we ordinarily take ourselves to interact with in everyday life, such as tables, chairs, and cherry trees. We assume that the meditator has unproblematic knowledge of the facts about her perception. The meditator now adopts a strategy by which she aims to form beliefs in the actual facts about familiar objects, and avoid believing falsehoods about familiar objects, on the basis of the known facts about her perceptions. The demon knows all the facts about familiar objects, and he knows the meditator's strategy. The demon can then cause the meditator to have whatever kind of perceptual experience the demon chooses. If the strategy results in the meditator's epistemic condition tending to improve over time, the meditator wins.²³ Otherwise, the demon wins.

Descartes believed that, for the meditator, the only way to win is not to play. This view is rather intuitive, for it seems that if the demon knows what the world is like, then he can cause perceptions that systematically misrepresent the world, and there will be

23. It would be nice to have a rigorous account of what it is for one's epistemic condition to tend to improve over time. This is not a topic Berkeley addresses explicitly. It is clear that, on Berkeley's view, we are sometimes mistaken about the connections between our perceptions (DHP, 238), so his aim is not to show that we are never deceived in our empirical beliefs (a view which would, in any case, be absurd). It is not clear exactly what kind of guarantee of reliability Berkeley is after. Here we will stick with the loose, intuitive formulation that the meditator's epistemic condition tends to improve.

no way to recover information about the world from them. Descartes therefore set out to prove *a priori* that he was not, in fact, playing the demon game. However, as we have seen, Berkeley holds that, even if Descartes's arguments succeed (and they don't), he will not have adequately answered the skeptical worry. This is because Descartes's meditator is justified in believing his senses only after he has gone through a series of sophisticated philosophical arguments, arguments which the gardener has certainly never contemplated. In other words, the meditator might, by the end of the *Meditations*, know that she is not playing the demon game, but the common folk, not having gone through the arguments, don't know this, and so are unjustified in trusting their senses. They do not, therefore, gain knowledge by means of their senses.

Suppose we take the demon game seriously, and admit that no one has knowledge of familiar objects unless either (a) she knows that she is not playing the demon game, or (b) she is following a winning strategy. Now, the gardener certainly doesn't know *a priori* that he is not playing the demon game, and he can't know anything *a posteriori* unless he can gain knowledge by his senses. Therefore, if the gardener is to have knowledge about his cherry tree, *he must be following a winning strategy*. But the gardener's strategy is naively to believe his senses. Thus a solution to the skeptical problem which satisfies Berkeley must be an argument for the counter-intuitive claim that naively trusting her senses is a winning strategy for the meditator, that is, that even in the demon scenario trusting one's senses is a route to genuine knowledge of familiar objects.

This suggestion about what the demon game thought experiment means for our knowledge may seem rather *ad hoc*; condition (a) requires the agent to *know* that she is not in a particular situation, whereas condition (b) requires only that the meditator's procedure actually *be* reliable, not that it be known to be reliable. This asymmetry appears

unjustified. However, attention to the understanding of inference, and of knowledge by inference, endorsed by Berkeley and his opponents will dispel this appearance.

For the Cartesians, as for Locke, there are two sources of genuine ('first class') knowledge: the immediate intuitive perception of a self-evident truth, and the indirect perception of a truth which comes from linking together several self-evident truths in a process of reasoning. What Descartes's thought experiments are supposed to show us is precisely that the veracity of the senses is not self-evident. But if the veracity of the senses is not self-evident, then knowledge on the basis of sensory perception cannot be intuitive, and so, if such knowledge is to exist at all, it must be demonstrative.

Berkeley, as we have seen, believed that our knowledge of the existence of bodies was intuitive. If he were correct about this, then, given some Lockean assumptions which it is plausible to suppose Berkeley endorsed, human beings would not have to know the rule they were following in order to gain knowledge by means of the senses. This is because, in Lockean epistemology, individual instances of intuition are foundational; the general rules of inference Locke calls 'maxims' are generalized from them (EHU, §§4.7.8-10). In intuitive knowledge, we have an "immediate view" of the truth of the matter (§4.1.9) and do not require the intervention of any further ideas or rules. This is, in fact, a plausible account of how 'the vulgar' form beliefs about familiar objects. Thus Philonous says, "Ask the gardener why he thinks yonder cherry tree exists in the garden, and he shall tell you, because he sees and feels it; in a word, because he perceives it by his senses" (DHP, 234). The gardener does not suppose that any further step is needed. When he sees the tree, he sees by an 'immediate view' that it exists.

That Berkeley endorsed this kind of view is further confirmed by our study of Berkeley's understanding of rule-following, inference, and the meaning of 'exists.' In chapter 5, I argued that the following of a rule does not require explicit, articulable knowledge of

the rule, but only the ability to ‘see’ what the rule will require in given circumstances. I argued, further, that inference rules are among the conventional rules of language which are followed implicitly (i.e., without explicit thought about the rule) by native speakers of the language. In §6.6, I argued that it is part of the meaning of ‘exists,’ as applied to bodies, that every actually perceived body exists. In other words, the transition from perceived cherry tree to existing cherry tree is authorized by rules of language which the gardener follows *implicitly*. The gardener may not recognize ‘*esse is percipi*’ as a statement of a rule he follows; certainly it is not a statement he is likely to produce himself. Nevertheless, the gardener can ‘see,’ by virtue of his linguistic competence, that every actually perceived cherry tree is properly described as existing. Berkeley’s maxim, ‘*esse is percipi*,’ is a statement of a rule followed by the gardener.

The demon game is an intuition pump, and a very effective one. But just what intuition is being pumped, and how does that intuition lead to the conclusion that the agreement between perception and existence is not self-evident? Berkeley identifies the underlying intuition as the claim that “Our knowledge ... is no farther real, than as our ideas are the true representations of [their] originals ... [which] are in themselves unknown” (DHP, 246; cf. PHK, §86). This is a near quotation from Locke (EHU, §4.4.3). In Locke’s view, one of the distinctive features of ideas of substances is that they aim at conformity to an external archetype. As a result, it is possible for these ideas to fail to conform to their archetypes, in which case the ideas are not ‘real’ but ‘fantastical’ (§2.30.5). Furthermore, the ideas of substances can never perfectly and exhaustively conform to their archetypes, and so are never ‘adequate’ (§2.31.13). This, of course, is precisely the notion that leads Locke into his skepticism about real essences. Since only the ideas, and not the archetypes, are available to our ‘immediate view,’ and since their

reality and adequacy depend on their matching the archetypes, it is impossible for us to have intuitive knowledge of the reality or adequacy of these ideas.

According to Locke, there are other types of ideas which do not suffer from these flaws. These are ideas of mixed modes and relations. The skeptical worry does not apply to mixed modes and relations because these ideas are their own archetypes; there is therefore no question of adequacy, since the ideas cannot fail to conform to themselves (EHU, §2.31.14). If all of our ideas were of this sort, then there would be no problems about their reality or adequacy.

This is precisely how Berkeley's phenomenalism is meant to resolve the problem. The fundamental assumption of both existence and nature skepticism, as Berkeley sees it, is the assumption that our ideas represent some reality which is entirely distinct from them. Once this assumption is made, the question of the accuracy of this representation arises, and we are on our way down the wild mazes. Thus, in Berkeley's view, the wrong turn made by the skeptical tradition is:

The Independence Assumption (IA) The facts about familiar objects and the facts about my perception are constitutively independent.

In claiming that two sets of facts are *constitutively independent* of one another, I mean that no fact in one set is partly or entirely constituted by a fact or collection of facts in the other set. Or, to put it another way, the facts in one set cannot be either conceptually or metaphysically analyzed into facts in the other.²⁴

24. On constitution relations between facts, see Foster 2008, 1-6. On the notion of a 'metaphysical analysis,' as distinct from a conceptual analysis, see Dorr 2005, §13.

If we include brains among the familiar objects, then (IA) involves the denial of physicalism in the philosophy of mind. We can, however, avoid begging any questions by simply stipulating that brains shall be excluded.

Once (IA) is accepted, there can be no intuitive knowledge of the existence of familiar objects, since, given the idea theory of mental representation shared by the Cartesians, Locke, and Berkeley, (IA) places familiar objects outside the realm of things available to our ‘immediate view.’ It will then be necessary, if we are to have genuine knowledge of familiar objects, to make some sort of *inference* from our perceptions to the existence of familiar objects. In order to do this, we shall have to show that there is some kind of connection between them. This is, indeed, Descartes’s project. But just by admitting that the project is necessary, we undermine the gardener’s knowledge. Furthermore, since we do not have any other source of information about familiar objects independent of the senses, no correlation can ever be established, and the project must fail (PHK, §86; DHP, 246).

This is the source of the asymmetry mentioned above. If Berkeley is right and the gardener is following a winning strategy, the gardener needn’t *know* that he is following a winning strategy because he has intuitive knowledge, and intuitive knowledge does not require explicit awareness of any general rules. Hylas challenges Philonous, “Ask the first man you meet, and he shall tell you: ‘to be perceived’ is one thing, and ‘to exist’ is another” (DHP, 234). Philonous does not directly contradict this assertion. Instead he points to the gardener’s *practice*. The gardener has not formulated the maxim ‘*esse is percipi*’ (and is, Berkeley might as well admit, not even inclined to assent to it), but he hasn’t formulated the maxim that the whole is greater than the part either. Rather, in each case, he sees that the instances of the formula are true without any thought of the general formula, just as Locke says. Whenever the gardener discovers a perceived cherry tree, he supposes that he has discovered an existing cherry tree, and there is no question of any intermediate step. On the other hand, if (IA) is true and familiar objects are indeed constitutively independent of our perception of them, then an actual

chain of inference is required if we are to have ('first class') knowledge of the existence of familiar objects. Thus Berkeley's phenomenalism, if true, provides knowledge of familiar objects to everyone who naively trusts her senses, whereas Descartes's proof from divine veracity, even if it is sound, provides such knowledge only to those who grasp it.

We have seen, then, that if the gardener's knowledge of his cherry tree is to be defended, (IA) must be rejected in order to show that naively trusting one's senses is a winning strategy in the demon game. There are three possible strategies for rejecting (IA), all of which have been explored in the history of philosophy. The first is content externalism, which takes the facts about (the content of) my perceptions to be at least partly constituted by the facts about familiar objects. This has been used as a strategy against skepticism by Hilary Putnam (Putnam 1981). The second is phenomenalism, which takes the facts about familiar objects to be constituted by facts about perceptions. The third strategy is neutral monism, which seeks to reduce both the facts about experience and the facts about familiar objects to some third thing.

Berkeley's philosophy is meant to provide a phenomenalist response to skepticism. Berkeley explicitly claims that the *esse is percipi* doctrine eliminates the need to appeal to the veracity of God in order to prove the veracity of the senses, and places the veracity of the senses at the same level of certainty as the *cogito* (DHP, 229-230). This line of response works by rejecting (IA).

9.2 The Problem of Unperceived Objects

In the case of actually perceived objects, it is clear how Berkeley's phenomenalist response is supposed to work: my perception of the object constitutes the object's existence, and I have intuitive knowledge of my perception, and I can intuit the connection

between perception and existence (even if I am not aware of the maxim), and thereby come to know that the object exists. The same is true for knowledge of the qualities of objects. On this view, knowledge of familiar objects does not require philosophical sophistication. The gardener passes directly from perception of an object to belief in its existence, and thereby gains intuitive knowledge.

However, the gardener also believes that the cherry tree exists when he does not perceive it, and even when no human being perceives it. The existence of unperceived objects is a major tenet of common sense, and Berkeley wants to preserve it.²⁵

Berkeley has two different ways of talking about unperceived objects. Sometimes, he says that unperceived objects exist due to the truth of certain subjunctive conditionals about human perceptions, as in [PHK](#), §3: “if I were out of my study I should say [the table] existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it” (cf. [PHK](#), §58; [DHP](#), 238). In other texts, he says that objects unperceived by us exist because they are perceived by God ([PHK](#), §§6, 48; [DHP](#), 212, 230-231, 248, 254).²⁶

These two sets of texts appear to be inconsistent with one another: the existence of a certain sort of divine idea does not appear to be the same thing as the truth of certain subjunctive conditionals about human perceptions. John Foster has argued that Berkeley initially adopted a strategy based on subjunctive conditionals, but, in between the writing of the *Principles* and *Dialogues*, abandoned that approach in favor of one based on divine ideas (Foster 1982, ch. 2). As Foster recognizes, there are two serious problems

25. Contrary to Bennett 1971, §38. Against Bennett’s contention that Berkeley was ‘indifferent’ to the continuity of objects, see Tipton 1974, 321-350; Berman 1994, 47-52; Dicker 2011, 253-254.

26. In fact, a third approach, on which an unperceived body exists as a ‘combination of powers,’ can be found in Berkeley’s notebooks ([N](#), §§41, 52, 282, 293a, 298). In entry 802, Berkeley reminds himself “Not to mention the Combinations of powers” and instead to say that the existence of objects unperceived is “with relation to perception.” Jonathan Bennett attempts to assimilate this theory to the subjunctive approach (Bennett 1971, §41). For criticism of Bennett’s account see Tipton 1974, 329-341. I will focus here on Berkeley’s two ways of talking about unperceived objects in his published works.

with this interpretation. First, although it is true that the assertions about divine ideas in the *Principles* appear hesitant, and those in the *Dialogues* appear confident, Berkeley makes both sorts of claims in both works. Second, the approach based on divine ideas undermines Berkeley's identification of bodies with our perceptions, and so undermines his response to skepticism. If familiar objects are really ideas in the mind of the 'author of nature' (God or the demon), then the Independence Assumption is correct after all and the demon has a winning strategy. All the demon has to do is bring about a systematic mismatch between his own ideas and human perceptions.

The first of these difficulties makes it unlikely that Berkeley changed his mind; the second makes it unlikely that he ever endorsed a simple version of the divine idea approach. However, rejecting the divine idea approach in favor of the subjunctive approach will not solve Berkeley's problem, for the subjunctive approach is also apparently inconsistent with Berkeley's response to skepticism. Intuitively, since the demon controls the meditator's perceptions, what the meditator would perceive in specified circumstances depends on what perceptions the demon would cause in those circumstances, and this in turn depends on the demon's intentions.²⁷ Thus, once again, the Independence Assumption is restored and the demon has a winning strategy. In this case, what the demon has to do is figure out, based on his knowledge of the meditator's strategy, what the meditator expects to happen and form the intention to frustrate these expectations. Note that merely *forming the intention* is enough for the demon to ensure that the meditator is mistaken; the demon need not actually cause the unexpected perceptions. As a result, the fact that most of my perceptions have gone roughly as expected thus far does not guarantee that I have not already been in this situation for quite some time: the demon

27. Winkler 1989, 222 explicitly embraces this consequence of the subjunctive interpretation, but fails to recognize that it undermines Berkeley's anti-skepticism. On Winkler's interpretation of Berkeley on unperceived objects, see below, pp. 424-425.

might, all along, have been intending to cause wildly unexpected perceptions if I get into some situation I haven't been in so far.

Since the subjunctive approach leaves my present perceptions untouched, its skeptical results are less severe than those of the divine idea approach, but the difference is smaller than it appears. This is because, as we have seen (ch. 8), it is Berkeley's view that making correct judgments about the attributes of presently perceived objects – for instance, judging that an oar is straight – involves having appropriate expectations (DHP, 238).²⁸ More specifically, what it *means* to judge that the oar (the body) is bent is to *parse* one's ideas in a certain way, as elements of the language of nature. In English, to parse a certain word as a transitive verb involves expecting a direct object after it. Analogous expectations are involved in our parsing of the language of nature.

In §6.3, I developed a general interpretation of Berkeley on bodies which is opposed both to subjunctive interpretations, on which statements about bodies are equivalent to long conjunctions of subjunctive conditionals, and to idea interpretations, on which each body is to be identified with some idea or collection of ideas. On my reading, bodies are quasi-entities created by the practice of 'body' talk, and, in particular, by our practice of using certain nouns as grammatical subjects of which we can predicate sensible qualities, thereby tying the sensible qualities together. I have further argued that, in engaging in this practice, we are aiming to capture the grammatical structure of the language of nature.

In defending my interpretation, I argued that this linguistic approach gets certain epistemological facts about Berkeleian bodies right, while both subjunctive interpretations and idea interpretations get those facts wrong. The most important epistemological facts in that earlier discussion were two: (1) we have certainty about the existence and

28. This point is emphasized by Atherton 2008a. Also see Stoneham 2002, 252-254.

nature of bodies by means of the unaided senses; and (2) we can learn new things about a previously perceived body by perceiving it with a new sense modality or with the aid of instruments, such as the microscope (see especially §6.3.3).²⁹ Here a similar issue is in play: some interpreters think Berkeley tries to solve the problem of unperceived objects by means of subjunctive conditionals, and others think he tries to solve it by means of divine ideas, but, as I have just argued, neither of these approaches is consistent with Berkeley's anti-skeptical strategy. In the remainder of this chapter, I will develop an alternative line of interpretation, based on Berkeley's language of nature theory, which will allow us to reconcile the two apparently conflicting sets of texts, preserve the existence of unperceived objects, and still defeat the demon.

9.3 Divine Language and Unperceived Objects

9.3.1 Deflating the Subjunctives

One of the clearest statements of the subjunctive strategy is [PHK](#), §58:

the question, whether the earth moves or no, amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit: *whether we have reason to conclude from what has been observed by astronomers*, that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such and such a position and distance, both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of planets, and appearing in all respects like one of them; and this, *by the established rules of nature*, which we have no reason to mistrust, *is reasonably collected from the phenomena* (emphasis added).

29. Exactly how Berkeley's views about knowledge by means of the senses can be held together with his views about the nature and aims of scientific investigation was examined in more detail in §8.5.

According to the literal sense of this text, Berkeley is identifying the question of the Copernican system's truth with the question of our evidence for it. I do not believe that this is a slip of the pen. One of Berkeley's favorite strategies is to collapse metaphysics into epistemology in just this way, that is, to collapse the truth conditions for a claim into the evidence for the claim.³⁰ My suggestion is that Berkeley means exactly what he says. The metaphysical question, whether the earth moves, is one and the same with the epistemological question of whether observational evidence supports an 'established rule of nature' from which it follows that certain observations would be made under certain circumstances. In other words, the conditionals of the subjunctive approach to unperceived objects are grounded in natural laws, and natural laws are grounded in human perceptions. Since natural laws are grounded in human perceptions, no distinction is to be drawn between the obtaining of a law and the evidence for that law's obtaining.

It is a well-known fact that natural laws can ground subjunctive conditionals. That is, when a law of nature requires that events of type *A* be followed by events of type *B*, it is correct to assert that if an event of type *A* should occur, then an event of type *B* would occur. This is a fact about how subjunctive conditionals work in English. I do not claim that Berkeley clearly saw this fact, or that Berkeley had a theory of subjunctive conditionals. Berkeley is, however, using English subjunctive conditionals in explaining his theory. My hypothesis is that Berkeley is using this kind of conditional, the kind that is grounded in natural laws, in the passages where he endorses the subjunctive theory. Thus, for instance, in [PHK](#), §3 he is claiming that his desk exists unperceived because the laws of nature require that whenever he is in his study (and various other conditions remain unchanged) he has desk perceptions (cf. Winkler [1989](#), 270-273).

30. See, for instance, Berkeley's treatment of dreams and hallucinations at [DHP](#), 235.

These reflections on conditionals might, however, be thought to show that, given Berkeley's metaphysics, laws could not possibly be grounded in human perceptions. One of Berkeley's central tenets is that ideas are perfectly inert, and only spirits can cause (PHK, §§25-26). It is the will of God (or the demon), and not the pattern of human perceptions, that genuinely *makes things happen* in Berkeley's world. It seems, then, that if God (or the demon) intends to cause some sort of perception in some particular circumstance, then *that* is the sort of perception that would occur in that circumstance, independent of any pattern or regularity in human perception. Thus if laws are to ground subjunctives, they must themselves be grounded in divine intentions. However, as we saw above, grounding the subjunctives in intentions opens the door to demonic deception.

This objection can be answered with the help of a clearer understanding of Berkeley's view of natural laws. Recall that natural laws are, according to Berkeley, the *grammar* of a language in which God speaks to us through our perceptions (§8.4). The grammatical rules of a language are a matter of *convention*, and must therefore be *public*. Private speaker intentions alone are not sufficient to generate grammatical rules. The intentions of the super-mind who causes my perceptions are therefore not sufficient to generate laws of nature.

In §5.3, I argued that linguistic conventions, for Berkeley, are arbitrary rules which we follow and rely on others to follow. Given this theory, however, if nature is a genuine language, then the expectations of human beings – the rules we rely on God to follow – will *form part of the analysis of the notion of a law of nature*, and it will therefore be impossible for us to be radically mistaken about the laws. Of course we may be mistaken in matters of detail, and we may be unable to express the correct laws in precise language, but it will be an analytic truth that human expectations about the behavior of physical

objects *for the most part* conform to the laws of nature. It is conceptually impossible that the vast majority of the ‘speaker community’ should have seriously mistaken grammatical expectations. There is, therefore, little room for demonic deception.

It might be thought, however, that given the limited role we humans play in constituting the language of nature our expectations will not in fact enter into that language’s conventions in a sufficiently strong way to render radical error impossible.³¹ After all, we do not actually *produce* any sentences of the language of nature.³²

This is indeed a way in which the language of nature is a rather unusual language, but it is not a serious problem for the line of argument I am pursuing. To see why, consider the following bit of science-fiction. An explorer arrives at a planet hoping to establish trade relations with the native population. Unfortunately, the planet’s atmosphere is extremely toxic to the explorer, and the natives are not sufficiently technologically advanced to bring trade goods up from the planet, or even to communicate by radio. Despite their lack of technology, however, the natives are excellent mathematicians and code-breakers. The explorer therefore determines that it should not be too difficult to establish communication and help the natives to develop space travel. To do so, she dispatches a probe to the surface of the planet. The natives will come to investigate the light and noise of the probe’s descent. The probe then emits a series of beeps transmitted by the explorer, which will be used to encode messages to the natives. The natives have no way of sending beeps back to the explorer, but the explorer is able to monitor their behavioral responses by means of a powerful telescope. The interpretation of the beeps becomes a collective exercise of a team of native mathematicians stationed near

31. I thank Rachel Cohon for pressing this objection.

32. Unless, that is, we directly cause ideas in others by our bodily movements, but I argued against this interpretation above, pp. 375-378.

the probe's landing site. Beginning by encoding a series of progressively more complicated mathematical propositions, the explorer is ultimately successful in establishing communication.

The explorer is analogous to God (or the demon) and the code-breakers are analogous to us. The claim I need to defend is that it is possible for the explorer to err in the beeps she sends. This seems to be true. At first, of course, during the process of establishing conventions for communication, the language is what the explorer makes it. Furthermore, if the explorer is sufficiently skillful in this process, she can form the language to be exactly as she wishes it to be. This is, no doubt, exactly what Berkeley's God has done.³³ Nevertheless, once the conventions of the community of interpreters become sufficiently well-established – once, that is, a genuine language has developed – it will be possible for the explorer, accidentally or intentionally, to transmit ungrammatical sentences of the language. These sentences are ungrammatical relative to the expectations the explorer has instilled in the interpretive community. Furthermore, it will be possible for the explorer to make a mistake and say something other than what she intends to say. This will be possible because once the existence of a community of interpreters with well-established conventions made the series of beeps into a genuine language, the explorer's use of the beeps came to be subject to conventional norms outside her. Even in a case like this, where there is only one genuine speaker of the language, the rules of a language are not a matter of private speaker intentions.

The grammatical rules of the language of nature are thus partly constituted by our expectations. Berkeley's view, especially in the *New Theory of Vision*, is that our expectations are generated entirely by past experience. The demon might be able to cause

33. This is the sense in which Berkeley can say that God's will "constitutes the laws of nature" (PHK, §32), and that the laws of nature are "rules . . . [God] himself has ordained" (DHP, 231).

us to have expectations by other means, but we can see that he hasn't. Given this constraint, it will turn out that the only way for the demon to change the grammar is for him to change the perceptions he *actually causes*.

Grammatical rules are normative.³⁴ I do not say this in defense of prescriptive grammar; rather, my point is that if one is trying to write classical Latin, then whether one has succeeded depends on the facts about the grammar of classical Latin. On the view I have attributed to Berkeley, these are the rules which the members of the community of native speakers followed and relied on one another to follow. These rules are *norms* on the activity of writing classical Latin.

Normative rules of this sort can ground conditionals, just as natural laws can. For instance, it is a fact about the rules of baseball that if the pitch is inside the strike zone, the umpire calls a strike. Even if the actual umpire of the game we are watching has been bribed and intends to call a ball no matter what, the conditional has an interpretation on which it is true – namely, the interpretation which takes it as a general fact about baseball, rather than a claim about this particular game. Call this the *rule-following conditional*.

In my example, I stated the rule-following conditional in the indicative mood, as this sounds more natural in contemporary English (at least to my ear), but Berkeley states his conditionals in the subjunctive mood. Notice, though, that Berkeley's examples in [PHK](#), §§3 and 58 are both particular: they are not general statements of the rule, but statements of what the rule would require concerning some particular person in some particular situation. This sort of rule-following conditional does seem expressible in the subjunctive mood. Suppose I am watching a baseball game with someone who does not know the rules, and I am explaining the rules as the game goes along. After a particular

34. On the normativity of conventions, see D. Lewis 1969, §3.3.

pitch, I might say, “if the ball had been just an inch lower, the umpire would have called a strike.” Again, even if (for whatever reason) this particular umpire actually would have called a ball, the sentence still has an interpretation on which it is true, namely, its interpretation as part of an exposition of the rules of baseball.

This, I suggest, is the correct interpretation of Berkeley’s subjunctive conditionals. The grammar of the perceptual language requires that if anyone were in such and such circumstances, she would have so and so perceptions. This rule is a norm, and the demon (or God) *can* violate it (PHK, §63). The violation of our expectations will not, however, render our claims about the present existence of unperceived objects false, for these are claims about what the linguistic rules require, and not predictions about the future. Thus, for instance, in claiming that the table is in the study when Berkeley is not there to perceive it we mean that the rules of the language of nature require that *if Berkeley enters the study, God gives him desk-perceptions*. In order for these rules to have the status of conventions, we must rely on God to follow them (miracles must be surprising); however, *that God will follow the rules* is no part of the content of our present-tense claims about bodies.

We can connect this account of unperceived objects more explicitly to my earlier linguistic account of Berkeley’s theory of bodies as follows. In chapter 6, I argued that names of bodies (including the general word ‘body’) are tools whereby we group together sensed and imagined qualities into one object. What I am arguing now is that when we say ‘the presently unperceived table in Berkeley’s study is brown’ we are grouping together certain imagined qualities, qualities we suppose anyone who went into Berkeley’s study would sense. Our grouping of these qualities is *correct* (our assertion is true) just in case the conventional rules of the grammar of nature require that, in the scenario in question, God cause the very ideas we are imagining.

This interpretation helps to make sense of a contrast Berkeley draws explicitly between my certain knowledge of the present and my merely probable beliefs about the future. According to Berkeley, our knowledge of the grammar of nature enables us “to foresee what will come to pass *in the natural course of things*” (Siris, §252, emphasis added; cf. PHK, §30). Nevertheless, our ‘deduction’ of future phenomena does not amount to *demonstration*, since “all deductions of that kind depend on a supposition that the Author of nature always operates uniformly, and in a constant observance of those rules we take for principles, *which we cannot evidently know*” (PHK, §107, emphasis added). My interpretation thus allows Berkeley to claim we often have certain knowledge about the present existence of unperceived objects but never have certain knowledge of the future, since God might perform a miracle.

In sum, Berkeley’s view is this: the facts about presently unperceived objects are grounded in subjunctive conditionals, which are grounded in the laws of nature, which are constituted by our expectations, which are generated by the actual course of our experience. Even if the demon violates, or counterfactually intends to violate, the laws, this will not render my claims about familiar objects false, for these are not claims about what the author of the language will cause or claims about what he intends to cause, but rather claims about what the laws require him to cause. This author can change the rule only by actually causing different perceptions. As a result, the meditator has a winning strategy: if she draws generalizations by proper scientific methodology from her perceptions, then further perceptions are guaranteed to improve her knowledge of the grammar of nature, since the facts about the grammar of nature are determined by the facts about perception. Knowledge of this grammar is what Berkeley calls ‘knowledge of the nature of things’ (see DHP, 245).

9.3.2 Deflating the Divine Ideas

As has already been noted, Berkeley discusses divine ideas as a strategy for dealing with unperceived objects in both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues*, but his discussion seems hesitant in the former and confident in the latter. This is due not to a change of mind, but to a difference in context. Whereas Berkeley's *Principles* is a straightforward philosophical inquiry, aiming only to produce sound arguments, the *Dialogues* represents an attempt at that most difficult of philosophical labors, the refutation of an incredulous stare (see D. Lewis 1986, 133-135). Berkeley took the *Principles* to have conclusively refuted materialism and was, therefore, puzzled that his book met with neither acceptance nor counter-argument, but only ridicule (Bracken 1965, 1-2, 23-24). Berkeley therefore wrote a new work on the same subject, a work which would "aim to introduce the notions [he] advance[s], into the mind, in the most easy and familiar manner" (DHP, 168). To this end, he chose to write in dialogue form. The dialogue is not just an artifice to allow Berkeley to answer objections as they come up; he had done that in the *Principles* (PHK, §§34-84). The dialogue form allows Berkeley to establish a particular, rather artificial, dialectical context. Specifically, Berkeley sets up the *Three Dialogues* as an *anti-skepticism contest*. Hylas and Philonous begin by agreeing "to admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from scepticism" (DHP, 172), and conclude by agreeing that the winning view is "that which denies matter, or the absolute existence of corporeal things" (259).³⁵

Framing the debate as an anti-skepticism contest has important consequences for the admissibility of premises. In the *Principles* Berkeley, speaking *in propria persona*,

35. The importance of understanding the dialectical setup of the *Dialogues* is emphasized by Stoneham 2002 who does not, however, develop the point in quite the same way I do.

attempts to build up a philosophical system from a few basic premises. In the *Dialogues*, Philonous is “content ... to appeal to the common sense of the world” (DHP, 234). Whereas in the *Principles* it is necessary to justify everything from axioms, in the *Dialogues* just any common sense belief is admissible.³⁶

There are, then, two closely related differences between the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. The first is that the *Dialogues* aim to be more readable to popular audiences (to introduce Berkeley’s notions “in the most easy and familiar manner”), and the second is that the two works are set in different dialectical contexts which render different premises admissible. Given my interpretation of Berkeley’s theory of unperceived objects, it is possible to use these features to explain why, although both in the *Principles* and in the Johnson correspondence (CGB, 290-292, 310-311, 318; see Winkler 1989, 229-232), Berkeley is quite hesitant about divine ideas, Philonous uses them confidently in the *Dialogues*. The reason is that, *on the assumption that the super-mind who causes my ideas is the traditional God*, the divine ideas can be used to give a simpler explanation of Berkeley’s view than can be given without them. The existence of the traditional God is a common sense, anti-skeptical view, and so can simply be assumed in the *Dialogues*.³⁷ In the *Principles*, however, the existence and attributes of God must be demonstrated, and they must be demonstrated *after* the existence and nature of familiar objects are secured. It would not, therefore, be legitimate, in the *Principles*, to assume a traditional sort of God in an elucidation of the nature of familiar objects.

36. I believe this observation can also be used to solve the circularity problem with Berkeley’s arguments for God raised by Dicker 2011, §13.4. See Pearce, [forthcoming\(b\)](#), §1.2.2.

37. Although the *Dialogues* were written in opposition to atheists as well as skeptics, and although there is some discussion of arguments for the existence of God, neither character is ever in any doubt that God exists. Philonous teaches Hylas how to argue against the atheist (DHP, 212-213), but there is never any debate between theist and atheist in the *Dialogues*.

My claim is that the exposition of Berkeley's account of bodies which I have developed in this dissertation so far is essentially already complete, but that, given traditional assumptions about the nature of God, Berkeley's claims about divine ideas not only do not conflict with it, but *can be derived from it*. The first step of this derivation has already been provided by Kenneth Winkler. Winkler argues convincingly that Berkeley subscribed to a thesis Winkler calls the *denial of blind agency* (Winkler 1989, 207-216). According to this view, in order for an agent to act, the agent must have some conception of what it is trying to accomplish. Since God causes ideas in us, he must himself have corresponding ideas, and since God causes these ideas according to a regular plan, he must have some conception of the overall plan he is following. God's representation of this overall plan and his intention to follow it ground subjunctive conditionals which make for the facts about unperceived objects.

Winkler's interpretation is, however, not fully satisfactory, because it relies on the unmodified subjunctive interpretation. That is, Winkler takes the facts about unperceived objects to be grounded in subjunctive conditionals, which are in turn grounded in God's will (222). As I argued above, this gives the demon a winning strategy. The basic idea of Winkler's interpretation of the relationship between the divine ideas and the subjunctive conditionals can, however, be adapted to my approach. The basic idea is that the facts about unperceived objects are to be grounded in the subjunctives, but that God, as the cause of perceptions, must have some mental representations corresponding to those subjunctives. These mental representations are the divine ideas.

This reading would take the divine ideas to be God's mental representations of the grammatical rules, i.e. the laws of nature. The demon could not be guaranteed to have an accurate conception of the language (that is, the demon, like our space explorer, might be mistaken about the language he has created) and so, on the demon hypothesis,

these ideas could not be guaranteed to exist. It is only if the cause of my perceptions is omnipotent and/or omniscient that these ideas are guaranteed to exist.³⁸

Thus this interpretation, which identifies the divine ideas with God's mental representations of the grammar of the language has the features previously mentioned. It follows from Berkeley's theory, but only by means of assumptions which cannot be made in the early parts of the *Principles*, and it does not conflict with either Berkeley's claims about subjunctive conditionals or his response to skepticism.

Unfortunately, this interpretation has two fatal flaws. First, a rule is a pattern of volition and hence, on Berkeley's theory, cannot be represented by an idea (not even an idea of God's). Second, it does not make sense of the relevant texts. When Berkeley talks about the divine ideas in connection with unperceived objects, he does not seem to be talking about ideas of the grammar rules. In most of these passages, Berkeley clearly has ideas of particular bodies, and not general rules, in mind (PHK, §48; DHP, 212, 248). There is, however, one passage in which Berkeley does mention laws of nature in connection with divine ideas:

Now it is plain that [bodies] have an existence exterior to my mind ... There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them ... 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 has ordained, and are by us termed the 'laws of nature' (DHP, 230-231).

38. If the agent is omniscient, then it follows trivially that the agent knows the grammar of the language it is speaking, since an omniscient agent knows everything. We can also derive the existence of these ideas from omnipotence. By the denial of blind agency, the agent who causes my ideas has some notion of what he is trying to do. But an omnipotent being always succeeds at whatever it tries. Therefore, if the agent is omnipotent, then the system of ideas it causes matches its mental representation.

Here it is quite clear that the divine ideas are distinct from the laws according to which those ideas are ‘exhibited to us’. The laws provide the structure within which the divine ideas are exhibited. In a language, the entities which are ordered according to the rules of the grammar are the words. In §8.3, I argued that bodies are the words (or, more precisely, the lexemes) of Berkeley’s divine language. It appears that the divine ideas with which Berkeley is concerned in the texts where he advocates the divine idea theory form the *lexicon* of the language.

The same remarks which applied to the account of divine ideas as ideas of the grammatical rules likewise apply to divine ideas considered as representing the lexicon. The facts about the lexicon are determined by what is actually said, and not by private speaker intentions. The demon cannot, therefore, be guaranteed to have an accurate representation of the lexicon, and so the existence of these ideas cannot be secured in the early parts of the *Principles*. However, if it can be assumed that the cause of my ideas is omnipotent and/or omniscient, then the relevant divine ideas are guaranteed to exist. In short, in order to ensure that there are divine ideas corresponding to the lexical items of the language, we need to know that the speaker has a fully accurate and exhaustive mental representation of the lexicon. Once the existence of the traditional God has been assumed (as in the *Dialogues*) or established (as in the *Principles*), we can talk about the representations of bodies which exist in God’s mind as the ‘archetypes’ of the ideas we experience, since they serve as patterns according to which God causes our ideas. This allows us to associate an individual, metaphysically fundamental object with each body, and this makes for a more ‘easy and familiar’ exposition.

9.4 Defeating the Demon

Descartes's demon hypothesis leads to skepticism via the *Independence Assumption*, the assumption that the facts about bodies and the facts about perceptions are constitutively independent. Berkeley's phenomenalist response to skepticism works by rejecting the Independence Assumption. Standard interpretations of Berkeley's treatment of unperceived objects, in terms either of subjunctive conditionals or divine ideas, undermine this approach. However, when Berkeley's theory of unperceived objects is interpreted in terms of the language of nature theory, the subjunctive conditionals being grounded in the grammar, and the divine ideas making up the lexicon, Berkeley has a strategy for both preserving unperceived objects and defeating Descartes's demon. The secret lies in the recognition that the facts about a language are determined, not by the private intentions of the speakers, but by what they actually say.

With this understanding in hand, we are in a position to understand the narrative of the progress of human knowledge according to Berkeley's *Principles*, and to see what an essential role language – both human and divine – plays in this progress. The story might be told as follows.

In the beginning, were “ideas actually imprinted on the senses, [and] such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, [and] lastly ideas formed by the help of memory and imagination” (PHK, §1). Attending to these ideas, I noticed that some were connected with each other according to rules. I therefore combined these ideas in thought by the introduction of a name: “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’ ” (§1). By further consideration of these ideas, I formed a notion of perception, and saw that there must be, in addition to the ideas, something which perceives, an “active being [which] is what I call ‘mind’,

‘spirit’, ‘soul’ or ‘my self’” (PHK, §2). In this way, I formed the notions of bodies and spirits, discussed in chapter 6, above.

Now these ideas “are visibly inactive ... so that one idea ... cannot produce or make any alteration in another” (PHK, §25). Yet the change in my ideas must have a cause.³⁹ I know that I can sometimes cause ideas (§28), but I have no control over what I perceive by my senses. I conclude that some other spirit must therefore be the cause of these perceptions (§29).

Attending to the sorts of ideas this spirit produces, I note that they “are not excited at random ... but in a regular train or series” and I call these “rules or established methods ... ‘the laws of nature’” (§30). As I recognize these patterns, I begin, by suggestion or inference, to move from the perception of one idea to the expectation of another, and so to gain “a sort of foresight, which enables [me] to regulate [my] actions for the benefit of life” (§31). To follow the appropriate rules of suggestion or inference is to be a competent ‘speaker’ of the language of nature (see above, ch. 5).

At this point, Berkeley has secured our knowledge of bodies, their nature and behavior, and the self, as well as a minimal sort of theism (belief in a ‘super-mind’ who causes my sensory perceptions). He then takes a hiatus to answer a long series of objections (PHK, §§34-84), and to point out all of the beneficial consequences of the doctrines so far defended (§§85-134). When we return to the main thread of argument, the next order of business is to secure knowledge of other spirits. Berkeley says that, since a spirit is not an idea, or like an idea, “the knowledge I have of other spirits is not immediate, as is the knowledge of my ideas, but depending on the intervention of ideas, by me referred to agents or spirits distinct from myself, as effects or concomitant signs” (§145). I argued in §8.6 that sensory ideas become signs of spirits in virtue of their *meaning* in

39. On the justification of this premise, see above, pp. 245-247.

the language of nature. By experience, the visual idea of a pale face comes to suggest fear (NTV, §9). When, therefore, I see a pale face and *I* am not afraid, I conclude that *there is fear not felt by me*. But fear cannot exist without being felt. There is therefore some other mind which feels it.

However, most of my perceptions are not of this kind (PHK, §146). It is by considering the nature and order of these other perceptions, by reflecting on the divine language, that I come to learn of the nature of the mind that causes my perceptions, and conclude at last that this mind is worthy of the name ‘God.’

Because the meditator has a winning strategy against the demon, she can come to know of the existence of bodies from the beginning, at the same stage at which she comes to know herself. As she gains knowledge of the nature of these bodies – that is, of the rules connecting her perceptions – she is learning the language of nature. It is by means of this language that she learns that she is not alone, that the world is populated by other finite minds like herself, and that the cause of these minds’ perceptions is a wise, benevolent, and powerful God, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being” (§149, quoting Acts 17:28).

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