

# Abstract of *Language and the Structure of Berkeley's World*\*

Kenneth L. Pearce

Berkeley's claim that the ultimate constituents of physical reality are ideas appears to be radically at odds with the commonsense Berkeley claims to be defending. In particular, Berkeley seems unable to account for the robust *structure* commonsense (and Newtonian physics) takes the world to exhibit. This problem of structure includes the problem of how qualities can be grouped by their co-occurrence in a single enduring object and how these enduring objects can bear spatiotemporal, causal, and other relations to one another. This book provides a sympathetic exposition of Berkeley's response to this problem.

I argue that previous interpreters have gone astray by paying insufficient attention to Berkeley's philosophy of language. Berkeley's first and most foundational philosophical move is the rejection of an account of mental and linguistic representation I call 'the Theory of Meanings'. According to this view, there is a special class of intrinsically representational entities ('meanings') to which the mind has pre-linguistic access. Language consists in the conventional linking of signs to meanings. Thus, according to the Theory of Meanings, a word is meaningful just in case it has a meaning. Berkeley's argument in the Introduction to the *Principles* is not directed only against abstract ideas but against the Theory of Meanings in all its forms. Berkeley's argument against the abstract idea *line* is really an argument that there could not possibly be any such entity as *the* (one and only) meaning of the word 'line'.

Having rejected the project of assigning meanings to words, Berkeley proceeds to develop a use theory of language, according to which a word gets to be meaningful when it is used according to rules in order to accomplish practical ends. In analyzing a bit of language, Berkeley holds, we must first identify the ends at which language is here aiming and then understand the rules speakers follow in order to achieve these ends.

In *De Motu*, Berkeley applies this approach to the analysis of theoretical terms in physics. He argues that the aim of the discourse of physics is to organize and predict our sensory experience. For this purpose, the physicist introduces words like 'force' which are used *as if* they designate language-independent objects when in fact they do not. I call these 'quasi-referring expressions' and the entities to which they purport to refer 'quasi-entities'. Quasi-referring expressions contrast with genuine referring expressions such as 'red' which are used to label entities (in this case, red ideas) that exist independently of our linguistic conventions.

Standard interpretations of Berkeley take bodies (macrophysical objects) to be identified with ideas or collections of ideas. By a systematic comparison of Berkeley's discussion of bodies in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* with his discussion of forces in *De Motu*, I argue that this is incorrect. In fact, Berkeley holds that bodies, like forces, are mere quasi-entities whose existence and nature depend on our linguistic conventions. In Berkeley's view, 'body' talk provides a way of talking about ideas in the same way 'force' talk provides a way of talking about motions, but bodies are not ideas, and forces are not motions.

Berkeley does not conclude from this that there are no objective norms to which our conventions are answerable. Rather, he holds that 'body' talk, in plain language and in physics, is used to organize and predict our experience. In order to do this, it aims to capture the regularities in our sense experience. These regularities exist, according to Berkeley, as a result of God's orderly activity of causing our ideas. God's activity here, Berkeley argues, can also be understood as a sort of speech. Thus in the development of the purely human conventions which create bodies we are answerable to an independent, objective norm: we are aiming to capture the grammatical structure of the divine discourse which constitutes the natural world.

Berkeley seeks to solve the problem of structure by means of his philosophy of language. He holds that it is by the conventions of human language that we are able to represent the world as structured. These representations are accurate to the extent that they reflect the structure of the divine language.

---

\*Oxford University Press. Available for pre-order from [Amazon UK](#) or direct from [Oxford University Press](#).