Berkeley on Religious Truths
A Reply to Keota Fields*

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Abstract

Berkeley admits that certain religious utterances involve words that do not stand for ideas. Nevertheless, he maintains, these utterances may express true beliefs. According to the use theory interpretation of Berkeley, these true beliefs consist in dispositions to follow certain rules. Keota Fields has objected that this interpretation is inconsistent with Berkeley's commitment to the universal truth of the Christian revelation. On Fields' alternative interpretation, the meanings of these utterances are ideas in the mind of God, and we assent to these sentences 'at secondhand', deferring to God for the content of our belief. While Fields' criticisms of the use theory are illuminating, and his alternative proposal is ingenious, neither of them ultimately works. In this paper, I reply to three of Fields' criticisms of the use theory, then press two objections against his alternative proposal. I argue that, although Berkeley is committed to the universal truth of the Christian revelation, this truth is not constituted by ideas in either human or divine minds, but rather by God's universal commands which order the life of the Christian community toward the good.

Keywords: George Berkeley; religious language; meaning; mysteries

According to George Berkeley, when St Paul says that "the Good things God hath prepared for them that love him are such as Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard nor hath it enter'd into the Heart of Man to conceive" (MI, §36, quoting 1 Corinthians 2:9), he thereby expresses a true belief. This despite the fact that the words 'good things' in this saying correspond to no idea had by any human. Further, according to Berkeley, *we* can (and should) believe this truth as well. How is this possible?

I have argued that Berkeley's strategy is to defend a use theory of language (Pearce 2017b). According to Berkeley, the meaningfulness of words *in general* is constituted by their use within a community as part of a conventional system of signs to accomplish some practical good. On such an approach, to assent to a sentence is to be a follower of certain rules. Assent does not, in general, require ideas.

In a recent paper, Keota Fields (2021) offers trenchant criticisms of the use theory interpretation and defends an alternative interpretation, based on a

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notion of 'secondhand assent'.[1] The meaning of St Paul's utterance, according to Fields' Berkeley, is constituted by ideas in the mind of God.

Fields' criticisms are illuminating and his positive interpretation is ingenious. However, neither of them ultimately succeeds. In this note, I reply to three of Fields' criticisms of the use theory interpretation and then press two objections against Fields' secondhand assent interpretation.

1 Truth and Objectivity

It is uncontroversial that linguistic meaning is in some sense determined by human convention, and this is explicitly affirmed by Berkeley in many places (see, e.g., PHK, §52; DHP, 216, 247). Further, it is uncontroversial that truth is partly determined by meaning: the sentence 'whales are fish' could be rendered true if one could bring it about that the word 'fish' meant mammals, or that the word 'whale' meant sturgeon, and so on. In this way, at least, truth depends on convention.

However, as Fields (2021, 826–827) rightly notes, there are different ways of understanding the role of convention here. According to ideational theories, such as Locke's, convention merely serves to attach words to pre-existing meanings (ideas). According to use theories, conventions *constitute* meanings.[2]

Fields complains that the use theory, in contrast to the ideational theory, does not allow religious truths to be 'necessary' and 'universal'. But what kind of necessity or universality is in view? Locke defines truth as "*the joining or separating of Signs, as the things signified by them, do agree or disagree one with another*" (EHU, §4.5.1). Hence, on Locke's ideational theory, there can be no truth (or falsity) unless there is a joining or separating of signs—an act whereby a mind *constructs* a proposition.[3] Nevertheless, Lockean truths may have a kind of universality insofar as the representational content of ideas is non-conventional, so that the truth value of a mental proposition (a joining or separating of *ideas*, rather than words) cannot be altered by convention. However, Berkeley is committed to rejecting this kind of universality, even for non-religious propositions. In the *Manuscript Introduction*, Berkeley explicitly denies that assenting to the sentence 'Melampus is an animal' involves joining two ideas. According to Berkeley, the word 'animal', in this sentence, does not signify any idea at all. The sentence merely "signif[ies]... That the particular... thing I call Melampus has a right to be called by the name Animal" (MI, §34). Thus, Melampus's being an animal is nothing other than his having a right to be called 'animal'. But this is clearly a matter of convention.

Berkeley clearly holds that 'sorts' (like the category *animal*) are created by conventions, and do not stand for either universal natures or abstract ideas, and are not perfectly precise (MI, §19; NTV, §109; PHK, §1; DHP, 245; for discussion see Glauser 2007). Furthermore, Berkeley is quite explicit that these conventions are rightly designed with practical ends in view: ideas are combined "in such sort as experience shows to be most convenient" (NTV, §109). According to

1. Fields also raises objections against what he calls the 'formalist interpretation', defended for instance by Williford and Jakapi 2009. For reasons of space, these objections will not be discussed here.

2. I interpret Berkeley's argument against abstract ideas as an attack on such pre-linguistic meanings. See Pearce 2017b, ch. 1.

3. On joining and separating of signs in Locke, see Marušić 2014.

Berkeley, whether Melampus is an animal is just a matter of whether Melampus has a right to be called by the name 'animal', and whether Melampus has a right to be called by this name is a matter of convention, and these conventions aim at practical goods. Thus, the truth that Melampus is an animal is established by convention with practical ends in view.

According to Fields, this account is problematically relativistic because it implies that if two people follow the conventional rules associated with a given sentence and it results in utility for one and disutility of the other, then the sentence is true for the first and false for the second (Fields 2021, 839). This worry, however, rests on a misunderstanding. According to the use theory, a language is always the language of some *community*, and thus the truth or falsity of a sentence is not a matter of the utility or disutility that accrues to one individual on one occasion. It is a matter of whether (or to what extent) the adoption of those conventions within the community tends to lead to the practical goods at which the utterance aims.

Tom Jones (2021, 389–390) has intriguingly suggested that the emphasis on *obedience to rules* may be a point of connection between Berkeley's philosophy of language and his political philosophy. In *Passive Obedience*, Berkeley argues that we should follow a collection of rules which are such that, if everyone followed them, the greatest overall good would result. Berkeley explicitly rejects the view that following these rules will always, in all circumstances actually lead to the greatest good (Berkeley [1712] 1948–57, §§7–14, 31). In the same way, the "conceived good" (Alc, §7.17) at which the rules of language aim is the general good of the community, and not the good of one individual on one occasion.

I agree with Fields that Berkeley would want to say that Christianity is *the* true religion, for all individuals and communities, and cannot be rendered false by the adoption of different conventions. This, however, can be had within the use theory. In speaking of the truths of nature, Berkeley frequently emphasizes what he calls "the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure" (PHK, §146). It is these action-guiding laws that God, according to Berkeley, reveals to us through the Book of Nature. The second book of God, the Bible, contains revelation of the same sort: practical instruction aimed at guiding human beings toward the good. As Berkeley says in his SPG sermon,

> by the Knowledge of God, is not meant a barren Speculation, either of Philosophers or Scholastic Divines, nor any notional Tenets fitted to produce Disputes and Dissensions among Men; but, on the contrary, an holy practical Knowledge, which is the Source, the Root, or Principle of Peace and Union, of Faith, Hope, Charity, and universal Obedience. (BW, 7:116)

The Christian revelation brings, according to Berkeley, this kind of knowledge of God. It is universal insofar as God's commands, together with the natural laws of pleasure and pain, are the same for all humans. The use theory does not deny that the Christian revelation, for Berkeley, is about a supernatural reality. However, it insists on the point that Berkeley here makes explicitly, that the knowledge of God contained in the Christian revelation is a kind of practical know-how for the life with God. Indeed, on the use theory it may well be that all knowledge turns out to be know-how (see Pearce 2017b, 112–114, 144–147)

2 Is God Bound by Human Conventions?

The next objection Fields raises is that the use theory would result in God being bound by human conventions. Fields writes, "Pearce's reading. . . implies that God knows the meaning of scriptures only by observing human linguistic conventions, not because God produces that meaning" (Fields 2021, 839). This, however, is a false dichotomy. Fields assumes that God has no role in producing human linguistic conventions. However, God's creation of the language of nature consists precisely in the inculcation of certain linguistic conventions in humans (see Pearce 2017a). Further, on Berkeley's view, many texts, including his own, have the aim of *changing* our conventions (Berkeley [1733] 1998, §33; [1744] 1948–57, §296).[4] It is to be expected that God's revelation would do the same.

One of the operative ends of language, according to Berkeley, is "influencing our conduct and actions; which may be done either by forming rules for us to act by, or by raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions in our minds" (Alc, §7.8). Speech commonly aims at changing which rules we (implicitly or explicitly) follow, and this includes the divine speech in the Bible. Thus, the use theory does not result in God's being *bound* or *limited* by human conventions.

What the use theory interpretation *does* suppose is that if God wants to make new words meaningful to us, or change the meanings of our words, God must work to change our conventions. This, however, would be true on an ideational interpretation as well, including the secondhand ideational view endorsed by Fields. On such a view, if God wants to reveal to us (in language) something for which we have no word, God must bring it about that we have a word that signifies that thing. But Fields concedes that signification is by convention.

3 Use Without Meaning

Fields' third and final objection to the use theory interpretation is that, in a number of texts, Berkeley recognizes instances of rule-governed use of words which he nonetheless takes to be meaningless. However, the use theory interpretation does not say that just any rule-governed use is sufficient for meaningfulness. Rather, it says that "the meaningfulness of a sign (such as a word) depends. . . on its being associated with rules *whereby it is used to accomplish some practical end*" (Pearce 2017b, 62, emphasis added). The rules whereby a meaningful sentence aims at these ends must also, according to this interpretation, be precise enough to be followed (155–156). None of Fields' texts are convincing counterexamples to this approach.

Four of the texts Fields mentions relate to Berkeley's arguments against materialism. According to Fields, "Berkeley thinks Hylas uses the word 'matter' correctly, according to philosophical convention. But used in that philosophical way, the word 'matter' is meaningless" (Fields 2021, 840). However, the correct philosophical sense of matter, according to *Three Dialogues*, is "an extended, solid, figured, moveable substance existing without the mind" (DHP, 225). Berkeley never says that, on this interpretation, 'matter' is meaningless. What is meaningless is Hylas's "obscure indefinite sense of the word 'matter'" (225). This is why Philonous says that "in all [Hylas's] various senses [of 'matter', he has] been shown either to mean nothing at all *or*, if anything, an ab-

4. For discussion, see Kail 2010; Pearce 2017b, 163–167.

surdity" (DHP, 226, emphasis added). It is Berkeley's consistent view that some definitions of 'matter' lack content while others are absurd (also see PHK, §24; Pearce 2018, 186). Attending to Berkeley's differing attitudes to different definitions of 'matter', we can see that in none of the passages Fields cites is Berkeley committed to the claim that 'matter' is used according to well-defined rules with practical significance but is nonetheless meaningless.

In addition to Berkeley's remarks on 'matter', Fields cites one of Berkeley's remarks on Newton's fluxions: "Men too often impose on themselves and others as if they conceived and understood things expressed by signs, when in truth they have no idea, save only of the very signs themselves" (Berkeley [1734] 1992, §36). Caution is warranted in the interpretation of Berkeley's writings on calculus because, as Clare Moriarty has convincingly argued, Berkeley there proceeds almost entirely *ad hominem* (Moriarty 2018) and sometimes engages in outright trolling (Moriarty, forthcoming). While Berkeley does accuse mathematicians of using words and symbols without ideas (and sometimes uses overheated rhetoric to do so), Berkeley himself very clearly does not think that we have to have ideas of mathematical objects before we can introduce mathematical symbols (see PHK, §§121–122; Alc, §§7.14–17). Berkeley's point in the writings on calculus (as also in *Alciphron* 7) is that mathematics itself does not meet the standards for meaningfulness that certain mathematically-minded freethinkers have tried to impose on theology. Berkeley himself does not endorse these standards.

4 Impossible Ideas

Fields' own account relies on a concept of 'secondhand assent'. That faith involves some sort of secondhand assent is not controversial in the period. Locke defines 'faith' as "the Assent to any Proposition, not... made out by the Deductions of Reason; but upon the Credit of the Proposer, as coming from GOD, in some extraordinary way of Communication" (EHU, §4.18.2). In Lockean faith, we believe something not because we can see (direct) evidence for its truth, but rather because we believe that it comes from God who "cannot deceive, nor be deceived" (§4.16.14). Thus, faith relies on another mind for its *justification*.

However, when it comes to the problem of mysteries (faith in things of which we have no ideas), this kind of secondhand assent is no help. It is not possible, on Locke's account, to have faith in something of which we have no idea. This is because Lockean faith is a kind of judgment, and judgment is "the putting *Ideas* together, or separating them from one another in the Mind, when their certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed* to be so" (§4.14.3). Ideas are the constituent parts of the mental state that is faith.

According to Fields, Berkeleian faith may be secondhand in a stronger sense than Lockean faith: it may rely on another mind for its *content*. Fields' Berkeley maintains that someone may "assent to a proposition in [another person's] mind without... having a corresponding mental proposition of her own" (Fields 2021, 842). Thus, Fields would attribute to Berkeley a notion of 'semantic deference' or 'linguistic division of labor', whereby the content of my thought may be partly determined by what passes in the mind of another (see Putnam 1975, 143–146; Burge 1979).

While this interpretation is quite ingenious, there are systematic reasons

why Berkeley could not have endorsed such a view.

The first problem is that there can be no such mental propositions. We have already seen that, in the Melampus passage, Berkeley argues that there can be no mental proposition corresponding to 'Melampus is an animal'. This cannot be a joining of two ideas because there is no abstract general idea corresponding to the word 'animal', there is just the particular idea of Melampus. This is a general problem for any attempt to rescue an ideational interpretation of Berkeley's theory of language (see Pearce 2022), and allowing ideas in other minds does nothing to solve it.

There is a further problem afflicting many religious statements: Berkeley repeatedly and emphatically denies that there can be ideas of minds or their activities (e.g., PHK, §§2, 27, 135–140; DHP, 231–232; Alc, §7.8). Berkeley insists that it is "manifestly impossible that there should be any such idea" as the idea of spirit (PHK, §135). Thus, he is clearly committed to the claim that not even God has an idea of Godself or of any other spirit. The same applies to 'grace' (Berkeley's example of a word figuring in mysterious religious utterances). Grace, according to Berkeley, is an active principle whereby God produces virtue and piety in humans (Alc, §7.10). As a result, not even God has an idea corresponding to the word 'grace'. Thus, talk about grace cannot be made meaningful by any connection to ideas in the mind of God.

Fields has a reply to this objection. He notes that, although Berkeley denies that there are *ideas* corresponding to these words, he says there are *notions* (Fields 2021, 827–828). Fields says his talk about ideas, in this context, is meant to include Berkeley's notions.

Fields would do well to heed Berkeley's advice: "I will not say, that the terms 'idea' and 'notion' may not be used convertibly, if the world will have it so. But yet it conduces to clearness and propriety that we distinguish things very different by different names" (PHK, §142 [1734 ed.]). Berkeley's notions are totally unlike ideas, and should not be lumped in with them. In particular, they cannot simply be substituted into a Lockean ideational theory of meaning.

Precisely what Berkeley's notions *are* is one of the most disputed issues in Berkeley interpretation (see, e.g., Adams 1973; Flage 1985; Winkler 1989, 279–282; Bettcher 2007). However, we may note that in the 1734 edition of the *Principles* Berkeley says that "we. . . have. . . a notion of spirit, *that is*, we understand the meaning of the word" (PHK, §140 [1734 ed.], emphasis added). A little later, he says that we have only notions of relations (§142 [1734 ed.]), but in the 1752 edition of *Alciphron* Berkeley says that relations "cannot be by us understood but by the help of signs" (Alc, §7.16 [1752 ed.]). However precisely Berkeley's notions work, it appears that they are too tangled up with signs and language to serve as pre-linguistic units of meaning, like Lockean ideas.

According to Berkeley, philosophers like Malebranche who think we are ignorant of mind because we have no idea of it are confused. It is not merely that we happen to lack such an idea, but rather that it is impossible for there to *be* such an idea, because spirit cannot possibly be "known after the manner of an idea or sensation" (PHK, §137). In the same way, for many religious mysteries, the problem is not that we (contingently) lack the ability to form the relevant mental propositions, but rather that there cannot possibly *be* such mental propositions, because the ideas that would be their constituents cannot possibly exist.

Berkeley is therefore deeply committed to the claim that even God does

not have ideas of Godself or any other spirit. However, God does of course know (have notions of) Godself and other spirits, and this knowledge does not depend on human language. It might therefore be thought that *God's* notions are suitable to serve as pre-linguistic units of meaning, even if our notions are not.[5]

The primary problem with this approach is that it gets the contrast between mysterious and non-mysterious propositions wrong. The claim 'Socrates is wise' is not mysterious, although neither 'Socrates' nor 'wise', according to Berkeley, stand for ideas: Socrates is a spirit and wisdom is an active attribute of spirits. Human notions, I have argued, cannot enter into pre-linguistic mental propositions to constitute the meanings of sentences. Hence, 'Socrates is wise' does not express a mental proposition had by humans. However, this claim is not known by divine revelation, and therefore ought not to involve semantic deference to God. According to Berkeley, 'God is wise'—a central proposition of *natural*, not revealed, theology—functions the same, semantically, as 'Socrates is wise' (Pearce 2017b, 152–154; 2018, 186–188). So this sentence won't signify a mental proposition, in our minds or God's, either. However, in the mysterious sentence 'God is triune', according to Fields, we are suddenly back at mental propositions again. This line of interpretation is textually and philosophically unmotivated, and therefore ill-suited to save Fields' approach. Once we've admitted that there are no mental propositions—human or divine—corresponding to such ordinary sentences as 'Melampus is an animal' or 'Socrates is wise', we ought not to reintroduce mental propositions when we arrive at the mysteries.

5 The Limits of Mediate Perception

Even supposing that God had mental propositions corresponding to these religious utterances, there would be a further problem. Human believers must somehow be distinguished from non-believers. According to Fields, believers *mediately perceive* divine ideas (Fields 2021, 844), and presumably also divine mental propositions. However, on Berkeley's theory of mediate perception, this is impossible.

Fields himself expresses this objection with admirable clarity:

> [Berkeley] thinks that finite minds learn to mediately perceive one idea by means of another through frequent immediate perception of the two ideas in conjunction, or in succession. But Berkeley also thinks that finite minds cannot immediately perceive divine ideas... therefore, no finite mind could ever learn to mediately perceive a divine idea by means of its own ideas. (845)

In reply, Fields cites NTV, §9, where Berkeley says that I can mediately perceive the emotions of others, though I can never immediately perceive them, and DHP, 174, where Philonous says that we can mediately perceive God and virtue, though they are not sensible things.

These passages do show that we can mediately perceive things which we do not immediately perceive. They do not show that mediate perception can expand our cognitive horizons in the way Fields's interpretation requires. We

5. I thank an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

could not "see shame or fear in the looks of a man" (NTV, §9) if we did not already know what shame and fear are, nor could we mediately perceive God and virtue by perceiving the words 'God' and 'virtue' if we didn't already know what God and virtue are. This is consistent with what Philonous says elsewhere, that a person "who had never known anything of Julius Caesar" would not mediately perceive Caesar by viewing a picture or statue of him, because her "thoughts [would not be] directed to the Roman Emperor" (DHP, 203–204).

What is required for mediate perception is that what we immediately perceive somehow directs our thoughts to what we mediately perceive. This cannot happen without a prior capacity to think of the mediately perceived object. As a result, mediate perception simply cannot play the role Fields has set out for it.

6 Conclusion

According to Berkeley, words that do not signify ideas in the mind of the speaker may nonetheless be used to express true beliefs. Among these true beliefs are religious mysteries such as the heavenly reward spoken of by St Paul. Fields is certainly correct that Berkeley wants to maintain that these Christian mysteries are true for all human beings while competing religious claims are false. This truth, however, is not an agreement of ideas in any mind, whether human or divine. It lies, rather, in the universal divine commands that order the life of the Christian community toward the good.

Abbreviations

Alc Berkeley, George. (1732) 2010. *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher.* In *Berkeley's Alciphron: English Text and Essays in Interpretation,* edited by Laurent Jaffro, Geneviéve Brykman, and Claire Schwartz, 17–274. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.

BW Luce, A. A., and T. E. Jessop, eds. 1948–57. *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne.* 9 vols. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons.

DHP Berkeley, George. (1713) 2008. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous.* In Clarke 2008, 151–242 (cited by marginal numbers).

EHU Locke, John. (1690) 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MI Berkeley, George. 1987. *George Berkeley's Manuscript Introduction: An Editio Diplomatica.* Edited by Bertil Belfrage. Oxford: Doxa.

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.

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