

The Semantics of Sense Perception in Berkeley*

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George Berkeley's linguistic account of sense perception is one of the central tenets of his philosophy. It is so central, in fact, that his metaphysics stands or falls upon it. Sense perception must communicate to us a very large number of important truths – such as the existence and nature of God and of other human minds – if Berkeley's project is ever to get off the ground. Equally importantly, there are a number of things it must *not* say if Berkeley's metaphysics is not to implode. For instance, according to the thesis of semantic atomism which was popular in Berkeley's day, all meaningful words refer to particular non-linguistic entities – whether objects or ideas. If this thesis is accepted, then in order for the 'words' of the perceptual language – i.e. phenomenal objects – to be meaningful, each one will have to refer to some non-linguistic (which for Berkeley may imply unperceived) entity, which lands us either back in materialism or in something like Leibniz's 'monadology,' depending on what sorts of things we take these referents to be. Nowhere in Berkeley's published work is there an adequate explanation of the correct method of interpreting our perceptions.

This critical problem of the *semantics* of sense perception threatens to either leave Berkeley in solipsism (if the 'words' of the perceptual language have no referents) or undermine the critique of matter (if semantic atomism is accepted), and neither is acceptable. The purpose of this paper will be to extricate Berkeleian metaphysics from this difficulty by constructing an

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account of the semantics of sense perception on which inanimate objects lack direct non-linguistic referents but are nevertheless meaningful, while those perceived objects which we take to be literally 'animate' (i.e., ensouled) do have such referents. The purpose of the language as a whole, it will be argued, is to communicate information to us about other minds, including God, which can inform our actions, thus creating a linguistic context for meaningful interaction among a community of minds. An account of this sort preserves the strengths of Berkeley's theory and avoids both of the extremes indicated above. We will begin by examining the theory itself, including its metaphysical and theological motivations, in order to gain a thorough understanding of its nature and importance within Berkeley's overall metaphysical understanding. When this has been accomplished, we will be in a position to construct a more complete account of the nature of the threat posed by the problem of semantics. Following this, a number of simplistic modes of interpreting the perceptual language will be discussed and rejected. In the course of this discussion it will be demonstrated that Berkeley's theory requires a complex and multi-faceted view of the perceptual language and its purposes and that this requirement strengthens, rather than weakens, the theory, since, as Berkeley clearly understood (see, e.g., *Alciphron* 7.14), any successful account of human language must also recognize that its purposes are much more varied and complex than mere communication of propositional content. While the development of a rigorous theory of language as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper, each of the incorrect modes of interpretation discussed will have lessons to teach about the semantics of sense perception, and the facts learned there will be sufficient to begin in the final section to apply ourselves to the actual interpretation of the perceptions before us.

1. Sense Perception as Language

1.1 The Theory. Berkeley's theory of sense perception as language is at the core of his understanding of the phenomenal world which, in turn, helps to form the epistemological basis for his claims about the noumenal world. The theory was undoubtedly at the forefront of Berkeley's thought from the very beginning of his philosophical career. In the *Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley's first published work, the theory is hinted at beginning in section 20, where Berkeley observes regarding judgments of distance that "If we had not constantly found certain sensations arising from various dispositions of the eyes ... we should never make those sudden judgments ... No more than we would pretend to judge a man's thoughts by his pronouncing words we had never heard before." In section 140, Berkeley refers to vision as "this language of nature," but does not yet clarify the sense in which vision is a language and whether he is speaking metaphorically. The real introduction of the theory occurs in section 147 which reads in its entirety:

Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive to them. It is by their informations that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life. And the manner wherein they signify or mark unto us the objects which are at a distance is the same with that of languages and signs of human appointment, which do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by an habitual connexion that experience has made us observe between them.¹

Thus it is Berkeley's view that vision is a language by which God communicates with us and instructs us as to “how to regulate our actions.” The language of vision is taken in the *Essay* primarily to communicate information about tangible objects. In Berkeley's words, “visible figures represent tangible figures in much the same manner that written words do sounds” (sect. 143, see also *Principles* 44).

This, of course, is not a theory of *sense perception* as language, but only a theory of *vision* as language. However, we learn quickly in Berkeley's next publication, the *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge*, that tangible objects are no more mind independent than visual objects (sects. 3, 44, etc.) and throughout the *Principles* Berkeley seems to speak loosely of all of the phenomenal world as a single language of God (sects. 66, 108, etc.), as he also does in *Siris* (sects. 252ff.). These factors, among others, led Colin Turbayne to argue that Berkeley's implicit view is that vision and touch are related as spoken English is related to written English.² However, the passage from the *Essay* quoted above notwithstanding, Berkeley seems to deny this view in the *Alciphron* where, after Alciphron points out that, according to the reasoning of Euphranor, Berkeley's spokesman, smells and tastes must also be signs, Euphranor replies,

That they are signs is certain, as also that language and all other signs agree in the general nature of sign, or so far forth as signs. But it is as certain that all signs are not language ... It is the articulation, combination, variety, copiousness, extensive and general use and easy application of signs (all of which are commonly found in vision) that constitute the true nature of language. Other senses may indeed furnish signs ; and yet those signs have no more right than inarticulate sounds to

be thought a language. (4.12)

It seems, then, that Berkeley's mature view is that the other senses provide signs which are annexed to the divine language – vision – but do not properly form a part of it. Thus smell and taste, for instance (and presumably also touch), though forming no part of the language of vision, may have significations in the same way that green lights for “go” and red lights for “stop,” though no part of the English language, have significations for speakers of English. It will be convenient, for purposes of this paper, to continue speaking of the total set of signs or symbols by which God communicates with us as a language of sense perception, but it must be kept in mind that, strictly speaking, Berkeley's theory is a theory of *vision* as language; other perceptions are also signs, but lack the requisite level of sophistication to be properly called language.

The theory as a whole is, then, that the phenomenal world makes up a series of signs or symbols by which God communicates to human beings. The world we experience and our interaction with it is, on Berkeley's view, nothing less than a “rational discourse” with God (*Siris* 254).

1.2 Metaphysical Motivation. Berkeley is remembered first and foremost for what he called “immaterialism,” but later ages have more often referred to as “classic idealism.” Immaterialism, simply put, is the denial of the existence of matter as a mind-independent metaphysical entity. In place of matter, Berkeley offers us his maxim, “*esse is percipi*.” “to be is to be perceived” (*Principles* 3, emphasis original). That is, Berkeley views the material world as quite real, but in a purely phenomenalist sense. Minds are fundamental in Berkeley's ontology,

and physical objects are dependent on them.

What are sense perceptions, and what is their source? The “common sense” reliabilist view is that sense perceptions report to us information about a mind-independent physical reality. This is precisely the sort of view Berkeley sets out to attack in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. If this view is denied, then what is to replace it? At *Principles* 26 and in the following sections, Berkeley argues that the source of our ideas must be another mind.³ Berkeley calls this mind “the Author of Nature” or simply God.

Although Berkeley first presents his linguistic account of vision in the *Essay* which was his first published work and did not presuppose an immaterialist account of metaphysics, there is every reason to believe that Berkeley already had issues related to immaterialism in mind when he developed the theory (see *Principles* 44). Furthermore, it is in the *Principles* that Berkeley first expands the signification relation to apply to *all* perceptions, replacing the common notion of causal relations (ibid. 64-66), and he does this in the context of responding to the objection that his theory cannot account for the complexity of, for instance, living organisms (ibid. 60). Thus we can see that one of the chief purposes of the theory is to give meaning to the world described by Berkeley's immaterialist metaphysics. Why, Berkeley expects his critics to ask, should the world be the way it is if there is no necessary connection between one event and another? Even supposing the existence of a God, why should he make things this way?

The *Essay* asked the same question on a smaller scale. That is, it argued that there was no necessary connection between the ideas of vision and those of touch, then asked the reason for the constant conjunction between them. Berkeley concluded that “the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature” (*Essay* 147) and signify ideas of touch (*Principles* 44). In the *Principles*, having laid out his view that all perceptions are equally

arbitrary,⁴ Berkeley expands the linguistic account of vision to perception in general⁵ and argues that all those things which are commonly taken to be related causally are in fact related by signification (ibid. 65).

In this way, the theory explains the existence and nature of the phenomenal world given Berkeley's immaterialist thesis. However, there is an even more critical task which the theory must undertake: the meanings given to sense perceptions must rescue Berkeley from solipsism.⁶

At *Principles* 148, Berkeley remarks that,

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 serve to mark out unto us the existence of finite and created spirits like ourselves.

“To mark out” is used by Berkeley as a synonym for “to signify” (see, e.g., *Essay* 140). Thus it is clear that a human body is taken to signify a human mind, and in this way Berkeley can claim that God is informing us of the existence of other human beings and thus, provided that our interpretation is correct and God can be trusted,⁷ I can in fact know that other persons exist.⁸ In this way, the perceptual language strengthens the immaterialist thesis by explaining the existence and purpose of the material world, giving a reason for the constant conjunction of one perception with another, and establishing a rational basis for belief in the existence of other human persons.

1.3 Theological Motivation. In addition to these critical metaphysical points, the idea of the

physical world as a language in which God speaks to us has a great deal of theological significance, most of which is contained in a loose cluster of closely interrelated issues which may be classed broadly as part of the epistemology of religion. Perhaps the best place to begin a discussion of these benefits is with the subtitles Berkeley gave to the *Dialogues* and the *Principles*, which are quite revealing as to what he believed he was accomplishing by laying out his theories.

The first and second editions of the *Dialogues* bear the subtitle:

The design of which is plainly to demonstrate the reality and perfection of human knowledge, the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a Deity: in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists. Also to open a method for rendering the Sciences more easy, useful and compendious.⁹

Thus the *Dialogues* have an explicitly *apologetic* purpose; the design is to show that “the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a Deity” are subject to “plain demonstration,” contrary to the claims of “Sceptics and Atheists.” Berkeley's theory of sense perception as language plays an essential role in this design. God, Berkeley holds, is known quite certainly, since there must be an active, thinking source of our perceptions. Equipped with this “direct and immediate demonstration,” he claims, “you may now, without any laborious search into the sciences, without any subtlety of reason, or tedious length of discourse, oppose and baffle the most strenuous advocates of atheism” (*Dialogues*, 212-213; see also 230-231). However, the advantage of Berkeley's theory in the area of the knowledge of God does not stop at mere existence. By means of the theory of sense perception as language, Berkeley is able to

argue that we know God better than we know other human persons. This is because we receive our knowledge about other human persons entirely by mediation of sense perception, but God is the source of every perception and every perception therefore adds to our knowledge of God (*Principles* 147-149; *Alciphron* 4.3-12).¹⁰ Furthermore, our perceptions are not merely random, but follow a determinate order which is taken to make up the *syntax* or *grammar* of a language; these are the rules we call natural laws (*Principles* 108). Because of this, we can aspire to *interpret* our perceptions and so to come to understand God better. As Berkeley says in *Principles* 109:

As in reading other books, a wise man will choose to fix his thoughts on the sense and apply it to use ... We should propose to ourselves 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.

Since our life in the physical is a conversation with God, “we need only open our eyes to see the sovereign Lord of all things with a more full and clear view, than we do any of our fellow-creatures” (*Principles* 148). God is revealed abundantly through our perceptions, if we can learn to interpret them correctly.

The *Principles* is somewhat different in scope and purpose than the *Dialogues*, as is clearly illustrated in its subtitle, which reads, “wherein the Chief Causes of Error and Difficulty in the *Sciences*, with the Grounds of Scepticism, Atheism, and Irreligion, are inquired into” (emphasis original). Whereas the *Dialogues* have an apologetic purpose and seek to apply

Berkeley's "plain demonstration" of God to persuade others, in the *Principles* Berkeley is concerned with the question of the causes of the mistakes of those others. That is, if the demonstration of God is so plain and obvious, why are there so many intelligent atheists and skeptics?

Berkeley's difficulty here is nothing if not Biblical. He quotes constantly from St. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus, usually with very little context. The relevant portion of that text reads,

And [God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being.¹¹

Why, Berkeley wants to know, must people grope in the dark to find God if, in fact, "He is not far from each one of us" and "in Him we live and move and have our being?" Berkeley believes that his theory provides the answer. He attempts to explain the failure of the rest of the world to infer that God, rather than matter, must be the cause of their perceptions in part as follows:

why they should suppose the ideas of sense to be excited in us by things in their likeness, and not rather have recourse to *spirit* which alone can act, may be accounted for ... because [God's] operations are regular and uniform. Whenever the course of Nature is interrupted by a miracle, men are ready to own the

presence of a superior agent. But when we see things go on in the ordinary course, they do not excite in us any reflection; their order, and concatenation, though it be an argument of the greatest wisdom, power, and goodness in their Creator, is yet so constant and familiar to us, that we do not think them the immediate effects of a *free spirit*: especially since inconstancy and multability in acting, though it be an imperfection, is looked on as a mark of *freedom*.
*(Principles 57, emphasis original)*¹²

The language itself is thus not only the explanation for how God is “not far from each one of us,” but also the explanation of why people are nevertheless groping in the dark for him. He is immediately present because he is speaking to us in everything, but we fail to recognize him because the grammar of the language in which he speaks has such great regularity that we observe the pattern while failing to notice its meaning and purpose.

It is necessary, however, for Christian theology to preserve the *transcendence* of God. That is, although, as we have been saying, God is knowable and immediately present to us (“it is in Him that we live and move and have our being”), he is not ultimately comprehensible by any finite intellect (“For who has known the mind of the Lord?”¹³), nor is he contained within the creation. Indeed, despite Berkeley's concern for refuting skepticism, when discussing our knowledge of God in a more theological context he says, “We are like men in a cave in this present life seeing by a dim light through such chinks as the divine goodness hath open'd to us ... We confess that we see through a glass darkly: and rejoice that we see enough to determine our practice and excite our hopes” (Letter to Sir John James, June 7 1741). What, then, are the limits of human comprehension of the divine?

Berkeley is quick to point out that his theory, unlike the “enthusiasm” of Malebranche,¹⁴ does not “imagine we see God ... by a direct and immediate view” (*Principles* 148). Rather, on Berkeley's view, God, as not being an idea, is not knowable directly, but only by mediation of certain symbols and notions. However, the same is true of human persons:

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 ourselves. Hence it is plain, we do not see a man, if by *man* is meant that which lives, moves, perceives, and thinks as we do: but only such a certain collection of ideas, as directs us to think there is a distinct principle of thought and motion like to ourselves, accompanying and represented by it. And after the same manner we see God; all the difference is, that whereas some one finite and narrow assemblage of ideas denotes a particular human mind, whithersoever we direct our view, we do at all times and in all places perceive manifest tokens of the divinity: everything 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. (ibid.)

Thus, although our knowledge of God is limited and indirect, and we do not ultimately grasp his nature, we nevertheless know God by the very same means by which we know other human minds, and these means give us much more information about God than they do about

other human minds. In fact, most of the facts we know about the world we know only by trusting what God is telling us through the language of sense perception.

The observation that, despite this deference for the transcendence of God and the limitations of the human mind, we know of God much the same way we know of other human persons, brings us to a final issue in this cluster. This issue is not properly part of the *epistemology* of religion, but might more correctly be referred to as the *gnostology* of God. That is, it is not sufficient for Christian orthodoxy that we be able to have an *episteme*, of God: we must have *gnosis*. *Episteme* is theoretical and intellectual knowledge. We reach an *episteme* of God by the sort of philosophical and theological investigation we have been undertaking in this paper thus far. *Gnosis* is the sort of knowledge that comes by intimate, experiential acquaintance. To know another person in the sense of *gnosis* is to know that person through interaction and personal experience in a way that cannot be reduced to knowledge of a certain collection of facts. If the knowability of God as understood by orthodox Christianity is to be preserved, we must have both epistemology and gnostology.¹⁵

Although this idea is one found throughout the Christian tradition, would Berkeley, specifically, want to defend it, or would he consider it simply another form of “enthusiasm?” Berkeley's letter to James takes the idea of direct individual interaction with God very seriously. For instance, against the need for infallible Papal proclamations Berkeley argues that “we have the Spirit of God to guide us into all truth. If we are sanctified and enlightened by the Holy Ghost & by Christ, this will make up for our defects without the Pope's assistance ... There is an indwelling of Christ and the Holy Spirit, there is an inward light.” Later, he specifically asserts that all Christians must be illuminated in this fashion, and not only a few who lead the others: “The sincere Christians of our communion are governed or led by the inward light of God's grace

... we see, as all must do ... by a common light, but each with his own private eyes.” Berkeley is careful to guard against “enthusiasm” here by insisting that such illumination be subjected to the light of reason and to Scripture and Tradition and that the “light” of the understanding should, in matters of religion precede the “heat” of the “affections.” However, he follows this by saying, “to ballance earthly affections by spiritual affections is right.” In other words, just as emotion is an important part of earthly life (but should be governed by the intellect), so also it is an important part of the spiritual life. Thus Berkeley explicitly holds at the very least that the individual believer is inwardly illuminated by the Spirit of God and is emotionally connected with things spiritual. Berkeley here shows that he, like other Christian thinkers, takes meaningful individual interaction with the divine to be an important part of the Christian life. It is as a result of this sort of idea that the Christian tradition, beginning at least as early as Clement of Alexandria,¹⁶ has often spoken of prayer in terms of “conversation with God,” and attempted to contrast itself with religious traditions which it has characterized as praying only formulaically and without expectation of a responsive divine voice.¹⁷

What has all of this to do with sense perception as language? Berkeley explicitly affirms a mystical inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, and would be unlikely to deny that one can converse with God through prayer. Both of these assure the type of meaningful, personal interaction the Christian tradition has always affirmed. However, Berkeley goes farther than this in that, according to the theory of sense perception as language, our every interaction with the physical is a statement in an ongoing discourse with God himself.

Thus it can be seen that Berkeley understands the phenomenal world to be a language by which God communicates with us for a variety of purposes. This theory strengthens Berkeley's

metaphysical position by answering questions about the purpose and nature of the phenomena, since they do not correspond to mind-independent material objects, and also by facilitating Berkeley's escape from solipsism. At the same time, Berkeley's commitments in the realm of Christian theology are strengthened by the solution of a number of difficult problems in the epistemology of religion. However, the theory is, as has been said, plagued with incredible difficulties as to the semantics of the perceptual language. The only straightforward interpretive cases Berkeley gives us are of perceptions signifying one another, of human bodies signifying human minds, and various general statements about the nature of God which are derived not from any particular perceptions but from the language as a whole (*Principles* 146ff.). Why, then, do we have so many other perceptions? What do they mean? What are we meant to understand by the material world? The next section of this paper will have as its primary purpose outlining these problems in more detail, especially as they relate to Berkeley's own understanding of language, and in particular the theory of reference developed in *Alciphron* 7. After this we will be prepared to begin our attempt at a solution.

2. The Semantic Difficulty

If semantics is a difficult field in human language, it is all the more so in Berkeley's "divine language." Here it seems that, although we have grown up "speaking" and "understanding" the language, we have been so entirely unconscious of this activity that, as we attempt to formalize our interpretation and reach a more precise knowledge at a deeper level of abstraction, we are confronted with what is very near to being a radical translation problem. Radical translation is difficult enough in itself, but the difficulty does not end there. In a radical translation case, one has a wide variety of external sense data to draw from in attempting to

assign meaning to the words heard; here, the sense data *are* the language, and the only source of non-linguistic data available to aid translation is the phenomenology of first-person consciousness. Furthermore, Berkeley ordinarily talks about sense perceptions signifying one another (e.g. *Essay* 140, 147, *Principles* 44) and instructing us as to how to conduct our lives in the physical (e.g., *Essay* 147, *Principles* 31). Berkeley then claims¹⁸ that we can learn all sorts of wonderful truths about God from this “rational discourse” we are having with him. To state the objection most strongly, it is as if I were to say to you “This sentence refers to the following one. This sentence refers to the preceding one.” and you were to walk away exclaiming about how much you have learned from our conversation. In fact, the only thing you have learned is that conversing with me is a singularly uninformative activity. Furthermore, as has been said, it is critically important that we escape from this “horizontal signification,” for if we do not we will be trapped in solipsism.¹⁹ In order to get a better idea of the precise nature of the problem and where we ought to begin looking for a solution, this section will examine two issues in Berkeley's own text: where in the perceptual language meaning is to be found, and what precisely it is for a term to have meaning.

2.1 Semantics vs. Syntax.²⁰ If Berkeley has anything to say about the semantic problem in general, and where we are to look for semantic content, it is in his discussion of the place of natural philosophy, especially that of *Principles* 108-110. Here Berkeley discusses the study of the rules or patterns according to which perceptions present themselves. At first there seems to be nothing of note here, for present purposes. For instance, in sect. 108 Berkeley points out a rather straightforward application of his system to natural philosophy, remarking that “Those men who frame general rules from the *phenomena*, and afterwards derive the *phenomena* from

those rules, seem to consider signs rather than causes” (emphasis original). In other words, the laws of physics are systematic accounts of the significations of various perceptions. Since the perceptions are passive and have no causal power, they do not, strictly speaking, cause anything; they simply occur before or after some other event according to the will of God, who is the source of our perceptions. Berkeley goes on, however, to draw an unexpected parallel with human language: “And as it is very possible to write improperly, through too strict an observance of *general grammar rules*: so in arguing from general rules of Nature, it is not impossible we may extend the analogy too far, and by that means run into mistakes” (loc. cit., emphasis added). We discover that this remark is not merely an illustration but a real part of the Berkeley's linguistic account of sense perception when, in the following section, Berkeley criticizes certain natural philosophers for writing only “grammatical remarks on the language.” Instead, Berkeley suggests, “a wise man will choose to fix his thoughts on the sense and apply it to use.” Here, the “sense” of the language is found in “the beauty, order, extent, and variety of natural things.” By understanding the language in this way, we will be able

by proper inferences, to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator: and ... to make the several parts of the creation, so far as in us lies, subservient to ... God's glory, and the sustentation and comfort of ourselves and our fellow-creatures. (ibid. 109)

Finally, in sect. 110, Berkeley remarks that “the best key to the aforesaid analogy,” that is, the best *grammar manual* of the perceptual language, is “a certain celebrated treatise of *mechanics*,” by which Berkeley almost certainly means Newton's *Principia*.

It seems, then, that one perception does not ordinarily refer to another perception in the linguistic sense of reference after all. Rather, these consistent rules of the ordering of perceptions form the *grammar* or *syntax* of the language, in which some other content is encoded. To focus on these rules to the exclusion of the “sense” of the perceptual language would be ridiculous for the same reason it would be ridiculous to suppose that the principle purpose of studying literature was the writing of grammar manuals. Grammar manuals are useful, and the study of language is worthwhile, but the purpose of literature is nonetheless not to be analyzed grammatically, but to be read for its content. This is the purpose of the phenomenal world: to be “read” by human beings, that we may get at some sort of “content,” which God has prepared for us.

If this is the case, then why does Berkeley nonetheless refer to these syntactic relations with the same terms as semantic relations, saying that one perception “signifies” or “marks out to us” another according to the laws of physics? Does Berkeley really believe that these regularities are always grammatical rules, and that perceptions never reference other perceptions in the narrow semantic sense of ‘reference’? Berkeley constantly speaks of one perception being connected to another by the signification relation, yet none of his discussions of the perceptual language include a definition of signification. Furthermore, in several places (e.g., *Essay* 147, *Principles* 31, 109), Berkeley includes knowledge of the phenomenal world as a critical part of what the language is supposed to communicate to us. Thus we are left with at least four problems regarding the location of semantic content in the perceptual language: (1) What are the referents of phenomenal objects? Can phenomenal objects refer to other phenomenal objects? (2) Does signification for Berkeley mean the semantic reference relation, or something broader? (3) How is knowledge about God and the conduct of our lives to be derived from these perceptions – that is, how are they interpreted? (4) Are syntactic and semantic relations mutually exclusive of one

another? That is, if the rules of syntax require that some perception x is always followed by another perception y, can it be the case that x refers to y, or does the syntactic relation exclude the semantic one?

2.2 Berkeley's Theory of Reference. Although Berkeley never develops a detailed account of signification in the context of the perceptual language, he does develop such a theory in connection with human language, in the form of his discussion of the meaningfulness of certain highly abstract scientific and theological terms at *Alciphron* 7.5ff.,²¹ to which we will now turn. In section four, Alciphron challenges Euphranor with the claim that Christian faith is impossible, because its alleged objects include terms such as 'grace' which are not associated with any “clear and distinct idea.” Euphranor responds in section five by rejecting Lockean semantic atomism and beginning to develop a quite innovative account of just what it is for a word to be meaningful, which, as Anthony Flew has argued,²² presages the later linguistic theories of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Lockean semantic atomism, as characterized by Berkeley, is the view that words

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 annexeth a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense; but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense. (*Alciphron* 7.2)²³

Berkeley makes much of the word “suggest” in this formulation. He takes it to mean that “every time [meaningful words] are used, [they] excite the ideas they signify in our minds” (ibid.

7.5). Thus the view which Berkeley takes to be the “universally received” one (*Principles*, Introduction 18), and which he rejects, is that a word is meaningful if and only if every time one hears or reads it one has the same clear and distinct idea, which the word signifies. If this is not true, then what is it for a word to be meaningful? The answer, Berkeley believes, is to be found at the poker table:

Counters ... at a card table are used, not for their own sake, but only as signs substituted for money, as words are for ideas. Say now, Alciphron, is it necessary every time these counters are used throughout the progress of a game, to frame an idea of the distinct sum or value that each represents? (*Alciphron* 7.5)

Shortly thereafter, Berkeley gives a second example: “In casting up a sum, where the figures stand for pounds, shillings, and pence, do you think it necessary, throughout the whole progress of the operation, in each step to form ideas of pounds, shillings, and pence?” (loc. cit.) From these examples, which Berkeley takes to be the rule rather than the exception, he concludes 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. It seems also to follow that there may be another use of words besides that of marking and suggesting distinct ideas, to wit, the influencing of our conduct and actions ... 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. (loc. cit.)

Berkeley's idea, it is clear from the further examples in the sections following, is that not only do words not excite the ideas they signify in our minds every time we hear them, but many words²⁴ do not signify any particular ideas at all, and these words are nonetheless meaningful. Furthermore, most of the words which signify determinate ideas signify not one idea, but many. These are 'general' terms.²⁵ There are, then, three types of meaningful words: those which stand for one particular idea, those which stand for many particular ideas, and those which stand for no idea at all. The first group I will call 'concrete' terms, the second I will call 'general' terms, and the third 'abstract' terms.²⁶ In order to gain a clearer understanding of how the theory of reference works, we will now examine each of the classes of terms by way of example and show how and why they are meaningful.

The only single words in English, as far as I am aware, which are concrete terms in this sense are proper names for inanimate objects.²⁷ It might be thought that Locke's "simple ideas" were a class of further examples, but, in fact, Berkeley rejects the possibility of forming such simple ideas – for instance, the idea of 'red' – as a class of abstraction (*Principles*, Introduction 7).²⁸ Once we have found an example, understanding its meaning is, however, very simple. So, for instance, 'Parthenon' is a concrete term. It refers to a particular marble structure located on the Athenian Acropolis. When describing various facts about the Parthenon (when it was built, the name of the architect, its current state of repair, etc.), I do not necessarily form a proper idea of the Parthenon in my mind at each step; that is, I do not constantly picture it. However, I know that at any time I may 'cash in' the word 'Parthenon' in these statements for my idea of the

Parthenon – that is, my memory of concrete perceptions of it. Note, however, that if I had never seen or otherwise perceived the Parthenon I would have no proper idea of it. This would not stop me from using the word meaningfully, but would simply classify it as an abstract term rather than a concrete one.

The vast majority of English words are general terms. These are words such as 'triangle.' To know what the word 'triangle' means is to know what set of objects I may 'cash it in' for: namely, any particular triangular object. That this is in fact how we use such words is borne out by the way in which mathematical proofs are actually written. For instance, we can write a proof about triangles in general which begins with the statement 'let T be a triangle' and ends with the conclusion 'therefore the sum of T's angles is 180° .' So, in fact, we consider T, which signifies some specific triangle, but one about which we know nothing other than that it is a triangle, and prove a fact about T using only this knowledge. This fact is then known to apply to all triangles. Thus, knowing what a general term means is, as in the case of the concrete term, simply knowing for what we may 'cash it in.'

Abstract terms are rather more nebulous, as they cannot be directly cashed in for any particular, determinate ideas. One of Berkeley's key examples is 'force' (as a technical term of physics) and, after demonstrating how nebulous the concept is and that it does not correspond to any particular determinate idea, he explains how it is nonetheless meaningful:

there are very evident propositions or theorems relating to force, which contain useful truths ... And 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 serveth also as a key to discover the nature of the celestial motions; shall we deny that it is of use, either in practice or speculation, because we have no distinct idea of force? (*Alciphron* 7.7)

Although the word 'force' does not correspond to any idea, there are nevertheless *theorems* of force, and these theorems relate one physical object to another, and physical objects are ideas. Thus, for instance, the theorem which says that $F=ma$ permits us to predict the outcome of collisions between specific material bodies, and in this way we are able to indirectly 'cash in' the word force for ideas. Berkeley argues that the same is true of the words 'grace' and 'trinity.' Berkeley gives a very helpful example of this pattern at 7.14 where he remarks that “the algebraic mark, which denotes the root of a negative square, hath its use in logistic operations, although it be impossible to form an idea of such a quantity.” Here we are asked to imagine an exercise in which (contrary to the present-day practice of mathematicians and physicists) the imaginary number i is not permitted in solutions to our problems. It is still, Berkeley says, useful to have the sign. The only thing that can be said of i by definition is that $i^2=-1$, but this tiny bit of knowledge permits us to manipulate an equation according to the rules of algebra in order to eliminate the i from our solution (assuming, of course, that the equation in question has a real solution). Thus, in order for an abstract term to be truly meaningful, it suffices simply that it have some relation to a concrete or general term such that it is possible, by manipulations according to linguistic rules, to come to know the truth of statements which do not contain any abstract terms. In addition to the terms mentioned above, this class will include words like 'soul,' 'God,' and 'self' which refer to particular entities which are not contained in the mind.

2.3 The Problem Reexamined. Armed with the distinctions made above, it is now possible for us to narrow the scope of the semantic difficulty with relation to the perceptual language quite substantially. In particular, we are left with the following questions:

- (1) Which of the 'terms' in the perceptual language are concrete, general, or abstract, and how does one tell the difference?
- (2) What are the rules according to which perceptions may be 'cached in' for one another?
- (3) Does the existence of a syntactic rule requiring some perception y to come after a perception x make it impossible that x 's meaning could be found in its ability to be 'cached in' for y ?

Note that in order for Berkeley's project to succeed, once these questions are answered it must be possible to 'trade up' from perceptions to demonstrate theorems about God and other persons, and to gain knowledge about how we ought to live our lives. Furthermore, since this divine language is presumably a perfect language, it seems that every word should be significant; that is, all of our perceptions should be relevant to this process of deriving theorems and actions.

3. Some Simplistic Hypotheses

3.1 The Monadist Hypothesis.²⁹ When it is claimed that our perceptions are the 'words' of a language, the first hypothesis regarding their interpretation which may occur to us is that each of these perceptions refers to some one unperceived thing. I call this view the "monadist hypothesis" because the metaphysical position to which it leads is very similar to Leibniz's "monadology." One of the attractions of this hypothesis is that the one particular perception

regarding which I am in an epistemically privileged position, namely, my own body, is a perception of this type (it refers to my mind). Since my body is the perception whose meaning I know, it seems reasonable to interpret all other perceptions by analogy with this one.³⁰ Thus we would conclude with Leibniz³¹ (though Leibniz's reasons for asserting this are clearly quite different) that all physical (i.e. phenomenal) objects are in some sense 'backed' by non-physical entities which resemble my soul to approximately the same degree that the objects resemble my body.

This line of reasoning is, of course, quite unacceptable to Berkeley, since if tables (that is, perceptions of tables) were backed by monads, our escape from skepticism would be no more successful than if they were backed by material substance. It is true that according to a pseudo-Berkeleyian theory of this type, God would be literally and directly telling us about the monads by means of our perceptions, but this type of response is open just as much to materialists as it is to Berkeley,³² so that the strength of immaterialism as a means of escaping skepticism would be destroyed. Thus the monadist hypothesis is clearly not an acceptable solution for Berkeley.³³

It is important to note that the monadist hypothesis for the semantics of sense perception is actually a form of what we have called Lockean semantic atomism, a linguistic theory that Berkeley rejects. For this reason, the unacceptability of the monadist hypothesis, and the failure of certain terms in the perceptual language to have referents, is a stroke in Berkeley's favor, rather than against him. Berkeley's account of language, as applied to human language in the *Alciphron*, is far more successful at explaining how we communicate and function in the world than semantic atomism is. It is a simple fact that I do not form a mental picture of a house every time I hear the word 'house,' and it seems clear that this does not rob the word 'house' of its meaning. Furthermore, there are many things that I cannot think of without the mediation of a

word or symbol, and I am nevertheless able to reason about these things.

It may be objected that in our rejection of semantic atomism we were talking about words referring to ideas, whereas here we are talking about them referring to minds or mind-like entities which are not ideas, and of which we can therefore have only notions. However, this objection will collapse upon considering the mental process of interpreting the perceptual language, since, when attempting to think on the meaning of the language, we will have to call up the notions of the things to which it refers, and the notions are mental objects.

It can be seen from this that, while certain perceptions do have direct non-linguistic referents, Berkeley's theory of language predicts that, if sense perception is truly a language, it will have words without direct referents, just as human languages do. This, as it turns out, is precisely what Berkeley's metaphysics requires.

3.2 The Language-Game Hypothesis. A second hypothesis for the solution of the semantic difficulty is the language-game hypothesis. The language-game hypothesis asserts that sense perceptions are in fact without direct referents because this is simply not what language does. Rather, the perceived world is a Wittgensteinian 'language-game' whose purpose is to provide a linguistic context for meaningful interaction between intelligent minds. There is no other meaning at all.

This is, of course, something of a caricature of Wittgenstein's actual position, but it is nevertheless useful to consider, especially since Berkeley often says things that sound very similar to this. For instance, in section 147 of the *Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision* Berkeley identifies the visual language as the means

whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive to them. It is by [the proper objects of vision] that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life.

Also in *Principles* 31, it is said that the visual language “gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life.” Again at *Alciphron* 7.7 Berkeley says that, although we have no clear and distinct idea of force, we shouldn't reject the word because it has been useful in “directing men how to act ... [so that they] are taught how to frame engines, by means of which things difficult or otherwise impossible may be performed.” Thus, in Wittgenstein's terminology, our interaction with God and one another in the perceptual language is a “form of life” rather than an exchange of ideas. All this is said despite the fact that, according to Berkeley's theory, the world with which we interact for our benefit *is itself a linguistic construct*.

In this way, we might attempt to solve the problem with a hyper-Wittgensteinian view according to which there is literally no such thing as semantics, but only *pragmatics*. The signification relation spoken of in Berkeley's writings would then no longer be in any way related to the semantic reference relation (which, *ex hypothesi*, does not exist), but would rather be purely syntactic. Alternatively, we might frame this hypothesis by returning to the fact that the senses other than vision are not said to be properly languages but only signs, and human languages are distinct from the divine language. We could then claim that the semantic reference relation *does* exist, but only with a sign in one system referring to a sign in another. It appears to

me, however, that the difference here is purely verbal.

There are three serious problems with this way of looking at things. The first is that it almost completely undermines the theological benefits of the theory described in section 1.3 above. Here, our accounts of the nature of the world and God's purpose for creating it basically collapse into the types of accounts given by materialist Christians. Second, Berkeley is quite insistent that we *do* learn facts about God and our fellow human beings by means of the perceptual language (*Principles* 147ff., *Alciphron* 4.7ff.). Thirdly, Berkeley is also quite convinced that words in human language *can* refer meaningfully to non-ideas (*Principles* 140, *Alciphron* 7.5ff). Thus if the perceptual language lacked this type of reference it would have a lower level of semantic sophistication than human language, and it seems that, on Berkeley's view, this might disqualify it from being a true language (see *Alciphron* 4.12). This view, then, is also unacceptable.

3.3 The Indirect Reference Hypothesis. A third hypothesis would be that all the words of the perceptual language reference non-linguistic entities indirectly. That is, while no particular word corresponds to a particular non-linguistic entity, all words can be “cashed in” for information about non-linguistic entities in one way or another. This view also has some initial plausibility. For one thing, it explains a puzzle we discussed earlier: after claiming that sense perception is a language by which God speaks to us, Berkeley goes on to derive truths about God not from any particular perceptions (he does not interpret some particular 'sentence') but rather from the language as a whole (see, e.g., *Principles* 151, *Alciphron* 4.15). Furthermore, it does seem that certain terms which otherwise appear not to be meaningful can be made meaningful in this way. For instance, a physical object in a room with two people, A and B, informs A of B's

relative location (which is, of course, a linguistic fact), and also gives A some information about what B is seeing.

A particularly compelling variant of the indirect reference hypothesis is James P. Danaher's claim that the reason for our difficulty in interpreting the perceptual language is that the perceived world is, in fact, poetry.³⁴ As Danaher puts it, "if the visual world is a language, it would seem that it is best understood as a poetic language whose meaning is conveyed through images rather than concepts, and whose intent is to communicate mood rather than a conceptual understanding."³⁵ The visual language is to be taken as a whole and seen as an attempt to inspire a certain attitude in us, especially toward God.

This again appears to have strong support in Berkeley's text. At *Principles* 109 Berkeley speaks of the purpose of the language being to "enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator." At *Alciphron* 7.14 Berkeley asserts regarding signs, "that they have other uses, besides barely standing for and exhibiting ideas, such as raising proper emotions, [or] producing certain dispositions or habits of mind ..." Danaher also suggests that "if the visual world is a visual, poetic language ... then some people may understand such communication while other people miss it because they are intent only upon a conceptual understanding."³⁶ This parallels Berkeley's remarks at *Principles* 108-109 to the effect that those who analyze the perceptual language too carefully often miss its content altogether.

Despite their high levels of initial plausibility, the indirect reference hypothesis in general and the poetry solution in particular suffer from several fatal flaws. The first and most obvious of these is that we have a clear example of a group of perceptions that *do* have a direct referent: a human body. Secondly, it is not clear, on the poetry solution, why we should call the world a language at all. What makes the world a poem rather than a painting? And how can either of

these be literal rather than metaphorical, as Berkeley's assertion that the perceptual world is a language clearly is? Finally, Berkeley's description of natural philosophy implies that God breaks the rules of grammar rarely, if ever, and then only for good reason, to get our attention (see, e.g., *Principles* 57) – a habit consistent with good prose usage.

3.4 Lessons Learned. While none of the above hypotheses are acceptable solutions to the semantic difficulty in Berkeley's theory of a perceptual language, each of them demonstrates certain features which any successful solution must have. Our discussion of the monadist hypothesis showed that the perceptual language must, in the terminology of section 2.2, be made up partially but not entirely of terms having direct non-linguistic referents. In discussing the language game hypothesis, we noted that the perceptual language has purposes beyond mere communication of ideas and concepts. The pragmatics of the language and the meaningfulness of the interaction which takes place between “speakers” are at least as important as the strict denotation of the words. Finally, the discussion of the indirect reference hypothesis shows promise in assigning denotations to many words which would otherwise seem meaningless, and reminds us that an entire work as a whole may have meaning not found in its individual parts. The poetry variant on this hypothesis was useful to consider primarily because the perceptual language does indeed seem to have certain poetic qualities. In particular, the beauty of the language often seems to be an end in itself, and the language often seems to be intended to inspire certain emotions rather than communicate propositional content. Any successful solution to the semantic difficulty must possess all of these characteristics. This is, however, good news for Berkeley's theory: all of these are also characteristics of human language.

4. What is God Saying?

Berkeley argues that the world of perception is a language by which God speaks to us. The question of this paper ultimately boils down to: what is he saying? A general theory of semantics would be required in order to fully systematize the interpretation of the perceptual language, and such a theory cannot be provided here. However, in human language we seem to communicate effectively without a systematic theory. In this section, we will round out our series of comparisons between the perceptual language and human language, and apply ourselves to the interpretation of a few specific examples.

Human language contains concrete, general, and abstract terms. The perceptual language does seem likely to contain all three. A human body furnishes clear examples of both abstract and general terms: your body as a whole is an abstract term referring to your soul, a particular non-idea, of which I have a particular notion. However, there are certain characteristics of your body which are common to all human beings. These combine to form the general term for human being.

It will likely be objected at this point³⁷ that what I am calling the 'general terms' of the perceptual language are the very abstract ideas which Berkeley so forcefully rejects. Berkeley does not, however, deny that triangles, for instance, all have certain characteristics in common. Rather, he denies that we can think of triangle in the abstract. On Berkeley's view we can only think of either the word 'triangle' or some specific triangle. We use these as tools to reason about triangles in general. The same will be true of human bodies: they have certain characteristics in common, but we cannot think of the common characteristics in abstraction from the others without the mediation of language. This has the very interesting consequence that the general term for human in the perceptual language is what linguists call a "bound morpheme" – a

meaningful bit of language that cannot occur independently, but instead combines with other morphemes to form words. After reflecting upon this point, it seems likely to me that all general terms, and perhaps many other terms as well, in the perceptual language function as bound morphemes.

Whether there are concrete terms in the perceptual language is slightly more difficult, but it seems likely that these exist as well. These would be perceptions that refer directly and only to other perceptions. Perhaps, for instance, the only immediate signification of the sight of fire is the warmth I will feel if I move close, and the pain if I move closer. These have already been determined to be syntactic relations, but in these types of cases it does not seem problematic that the syntactic relation and the semantic relation should overlap, since a certain degree of regularity is necessary for meaningful interaction. This can be compared with any of a number of phrases – greetings, for instance – which are uttered almost ritually in human language with little, if any, thought of meaning outside the ritual itself. These provide a useful framework for interaction, while not having any real semantic content.

Among abstract terms, we should distinguish between those that have non-linguistic referents and those that have no referents. Here again we expect to find both. Referented and referentless abstract terms, as I will call them, also exist in human language. 'Me' is a referented abstract term – when I utter it, I am its referent, and I am not an idea. 'Kindness,' on the other hand, is a referentless abstract term – there is no substance about which we are speaking when we speak of kindness. Meaningful referentless abstract terms refer indirectly to some kind of idea or substance. So, for instance, 'kindness' gets its meaning from the fact that it can be said to be instantiated by certain human actions, and the actions are perceivable. Understanding the meaning of 'kindness' allows us, among other things, to demonstrate theorems about particular

human beings, which can inform our later actions toward them.

Referentless abstract terms in the perceptual language will be similar to those found in human language. A likely example of such a term is a starry night sky. Here, it seems, we are intended to understand the power, wisdom, and artistry of God.³⁸ A more mundane example, which has already been discussed,³⁹ is that of a table in a room with two people.

It seems, then, that the perceptual language has every type of term that human languages have. There is more to language than denotation, however. The perceptual language, like human languages, has great beauty, and great ability to inspire feeling. It is also entirely through the language that we are made aware of and interact with our fellow minds.

We have already considered a few examples of statements of the perceptual language and their meanings. However, there are some more difficult cases we should consider. For instance, while we do not find it difficult to recognize human beings, and we correctly interpret human bodies as denoting consciousnesses like our own, what about animals? A detailed semantic theory, when applied to the perceptual language, ought to tell us whether any non-human animals experience consciousness and, if so, which ones. What is difficult about this question is that we do not seem to know immediately which part of our perceptions of a human body actually denote consciousness. We know that human beings are intelligent primarily by their words and actions rather than by their bodies, and some animals – dolphins being perhaps the best example – do, arguably, show signs of intelligence. Is this sufficient? It does seem that if we were able to demonstrate that dolphin chatter or whale songs were sophisticated languages it would show that they experienced consciousness,⁴⁰ but is there another way of determining these things?

One might think that the part of the human body which explicitly denotes consciousness

is the cerebral cortex, and, in the ordinary case where the cerebral cortex is not visible, we simply infer consciousness from the surrounding perceptions which are known to imply the presence of a cerebral cortex. If this were so, it would be the case that most higher animal bodies are referented abstract terms – that is, these animals would have souls. This seems to be a fairly reasonable interpretation based on our present knowledge of the perceptual language and, for instance, the correspondence of electro-chemical activity in the cerebral cortex to conscious thoughts. Animals, however, remain a borderline case and it is difficult to determine the precise meanings of these perceptions.

There are corresponding borderline cases in human language. An example is that, while we can in fact tell most of the time, we do not have a systematic procedure for determining whether a particular utterance of the sentence “How are you?” is a real question expecting a real answer or simply part of a standard greeting ritual, forming a linguistic context for interaction.

These are issues related to determining the *existence* of finite minds. However, the perceptual language also provides us information about the nature and experience of those minds. For instance, it has already been mentioned that by observing a person's location – specifically, the location and direction of his or her eyes – we can determine with a fair degree of accuracy what he or she must be seeing. Additionally, the words and actions of the person are known to correspond to his or her will, so that information about volition is communicated. Finally, there is a certain degree of involuntary 'body language' – which, on the view being discussed, is quite literally *language* – which communicates information about an individual's emotional state. All of these things provide information about minds, which makes meaningful interaction possible.

Language, however, has a wide variety of purposes beyond the communication of ideas

which is the major concern of the above examples. A humorous example used by Berkeley is that “when a Schoolman tells me *Aristotle hath said it*, all I conceive he means by it, is to dispose me to embrace his opinion” (*Principles*, Introduction 20, emphasis original). That is, the Scholastic is not seeking to impart information about Aristotle, but rather a feeling of confidence in the proposition. The perceptual language seems to be geared even more strongly toward non-conceptual types of communication, and is very effective at creating certain types of attitudes and emotions. Danaher observes, regarding two particular individuals commended by Jesus for their great faith,⁴¹ that they possess “a deep confidence in a God who dispenses his mercy out of his own sovereign goodness, and it seems that they came to faith ... through the visual language which made up the circumstances of their lives.”⁴²

Danaher's point about the circumstances of life is certainly a correct analysis of one way in which the perceptual language can inspire us to “a deep confidence,” as he puts it, in the author of that language: that is, many people of faith report the strengthening of their faith by, for instance, divine provision for their physical needs, and food, shelter, and other physical needs are, on Berkeley's view, elements of the divine language. However, there is more to the non-propositional aspect of the language than this. Berkeley exhorts us to consider 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” (*Principles* 109). Here 'inference' can certainly be taken in the strict sense: that is, by observing, for instance, the elegance of natural systems, whether in physics, physiology, or some other science, we are assured that God's wisdom far surpasses our own. Furthermore, by considering the suitability of the world for man and God's provisions for our needs we can come to a firmer belief in divine beneficence. On the other hand, this way of considering the matter, using 'inference' in the strict sense and discussing

our inferences from nature with this kind of detachment, over-intellectualizes the matter. Considering our perceptions in a less analytic vein we become aware that God seems to be using, as it were, a touch of rhetoric or poetic flourish. The beauty of the creation has an emotional effect, which ought, at the very least, to inspire awe. The greatness of God is communicated in the creation by rational demonstration, but this demonstration is not presented dryly, but, rather, in such a way as to truly inspire confidence in the greatness of its creator.

In sum, it appears that there are two types of interpretation which we can attach to our perceptions: (1) perceptions provide us with information about other finite minds, and (2) perceptions communicate to us the power and goodness of God and inspire us to attitudes of reverence and trust with regard to him. These types of interpretations certainly overlap in the perceptions they describe, and they may not be exhaustive of the interpretations of the perceptions we experience. However, language is a complex and multifarious thing, and to describe its uses and interpretations is a seemingly endless task. What we *can* learn from the above discussion is that the difficulties we have in interpreting the perceptual language are very similar to the difficulties involved in interpreting human languages. The similarities between the two are certainly substantial enough that a detailed general theory of semantics which applied to human languages would go a long way toward successfully systematizing the interpretation of the visual language. However, as with human language, we can, in most cases, successfully interpret the perceptual language even in the absence of a rigorous systematization of semantics.

- 1 The phrase “Author of Nature” is an addition found only in the third edition; the first and second editions read “universal language of Nature.”
- 2 Colin Murray Turbayne, “Berkeley's Metaphysical Grammar” in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge with Critical Essays* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970): 3-36. Turbayne cites the passages mentioned on p. 13. Turbayne's analysis is also accepted by Walter E. Creery in his “Berkeley's Argument for a Divine Visual Language,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972): 217-218.
- 3 Berkeley prefers the word “spirit,” but I will use the more neutral word “mind” so as not to insert unjustified theological baggage into the discussion.
- 4 Arbitrariness is, on Berkeley's view, an essential characteristic of language. See, e.g., *Alciphron* 4.7ff. Locke is the source of this view. See *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* 3.2.1.
- 5 But see the caveat at the end of sect. 1.1 above.
- 6 Of course Berkeley is not in danger of true solipsism, as the mere existence of perceptions, independent of their nature, proves the existence of some sort of “Author of Nature;” the concern here is for the existence of other finite minds.
- 7 This latter is not self-evident at this stage of the argument; no natural theology has been undertaken and thus the only thing known about God is that he causes my perceptions.
- 8 Curiously enough, scholars have often missed this point. For instance, Kenneth P. Winkler mentions in passing “Berkeley's claim that ideas of sense never signify *vertically*, or in a way that involves descent to a level of things different in kind from the ideas themselves” (*Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989): 21). Walter Creery also remarks that “ordinary discourse has a referential function but the phenomenal language does not have such (and indeed in terms of the attack on matter and substance, the phenomenal language cannot have such)” (op. cit. 219), and this despite his ultimate recognition that if “in Berkeley's theory of meaning there is no descriptive function at all” then “metaphysical solipsism lurks in the background and ... it is by means of the descriptive function that a case can be made out for the defeat of solipsism” (ibid. 222). As will be

discussed in depth below, Winkler and Creery are right that if *all* perceptions had direct referents, Berkeley's attack on materialism would fail (he would be stuck in what I call the “monadist hypothesis;” see sect, 3.1 below), but if *no* perceptions have direct referents then Berkeley's theory fails to accomplish one of its metaphysical purposes: rescuing the immaterialist from solipsism.

9 The third edition shortens this to just “In opposition to Sceptics and Atheists.”

10 On this argument, see David Kline, “Berkeley's Divine Language Argument,” in E. Sosa, ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987); reprinted in David Berman, ed., *George Berkeley – Alciphron in Focus* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 185-199.

11 Acts 17:26-28a. Quotation from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Henceforth “NKJV.”

12 See also *Alciphron* 4.15.

13 Romans 11:34 (Quoting Isaiah 40:13, LXX), NKJV.

14 The importance to Berkeley of avoiding “enthusiasm” was pointed out to me by *Religious Studies'* anonymous referee. The view Berkeley wishes to avoid is referred to as “the enthusiasm of Malebranche” at *Dialogues* 214.

15 On the concept of knowing God by personal interaction in the New Testament, see, e.g., John 10:14-15, 15:1-15, 17:3, Galatians 4:6-9, and Hebrews 10:19-22. In later Christian tradition, see, e.g., Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1, 13.9.

16 2.534

17 See Matthew 5:5-8, but note that many Christian traditions today do make use of formulaic prayer, often to the exclusion of extemporaneous prayer, despite this tendency in the New Testament and subsequent Christian writings. In other words, the opinion of Clement is not a universal principle of Christian practice.

18 See sect. 1.3 above.

19 By see note 8, above.

20 *Religious Studies*' anonymous referee correctly points out that this section depends on the assumption that Berkeley's use of the word 'grammar' is at least roughly equivalent to the use of the word 'syntax' in modern linguistics. The problems identified in this section will cease to be problematic if Berkeley means by grammar only “The fundamental principles or rules of an art or science” (“grammar, *n.*” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed (Oxford University Press: 1989): definition 6). However, this definition of grammar is attested in the *OED* only once before Berkeley's time and that in a clearly metaphorical context. The next citation for this definition is from 1792, over eighty years after the publication of the *Principles*. On the other hand, *OED* definition 1 reads,

That department of the study of a language which deals with its inflexional forms or other means of indicating the relations of words in the sentence, and with the rules for employing these in accordance with established usage; usually including also the department which deals with the phonetic system of the language and the principles of its representation in writing.

This meaning is well attested from 1362 to present, though its application to languages other than Latin did not become well accepted until at least 1600. It can be seen, then, that Berkeley's usage of 'grammar' may be wider than our 'syntax,' including what we call morphology, phonetics, and orthography, but it ought not to be understood as including semantics. Furthermore, in several of the passages cited below Berkeley speaks of studying the “grammar” of the language as opposed to studying its “sense,” which maps neatly onto the syntax-semantics contrast. The most useful point which can be drawn from this discussion is that we may be dealing not only with rules of syntax, but also with rules of morphology or phonetics (if Colin Turbayne's thesis about the relation between vision and touch is false, as was argued in section one, above, then it does not seem that the perceptual language has an orthography).

- 21 All section numbers in *Alciphron* 7 are from the third edition of 1752.
- 22 “Was Berkeley a Precursor of Wittgenstein?” in W. B. Todd, ed., *Hume and the Enlightenment: Essays Presented to Ernest Campbell Mossner* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1974). Reprinted in Berman, op. cit., 214-226.
- 23 See also *Principles*, Introduction 18ff. Berkeley does not explicitly attribute this view to Locke, and it is not generally regarded as an accurate picture of Locke's view. However, Berkeley believes that this is an opinion “universally received” (*Principles*, Introduction 18), and the source of its wide acceptance is likely to have been an interpretation, correct or incorrect, of Locke. It is also likely that Berkeley himself interpreted Locke in this way. For this reason, I have characterized this view as 'Lockean,' though it may not, in fact, have been Locke's own view. On this, see Winkler, op. cit., 18-19.
- 24 Examples in *Alciphron* include 'grace,' 'trinity,' and 'force.' This category must also include all of Berkeley's 'notions' from *Principles* 27, 140, etc., such as 'will,' 'soul,' and 'spirit.' (The technical usage of 'notion' is introduced in the second edition of 1734, four years after Berkeley wrote *Alciphron*.)
- 25 “But it seems that a word becomes general by being made the sign ... of several particular ideas, any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind.” (*Principles*, Introduction 11)
- 26 Berkeley, of course, has a strong dislike for the word 'abstract.' However, his disagreement is really with a particular understanding of abstraction on which it involves forming ideas which are underspecified (having had some of their properties taken away) but nevertheless clear and distinct. My usage of abstract here as simply the antonym to 'concrete' is in line with the contemporary popular usage rather than the early modern technical usage.
- 27 Proper names of persons are, of course, not 'concrete' terms, since we have only a notion of a person, and not a distinct idea.
- 28 On the type of abstraction Berkeley rejects, as opposed to the abstract terms discussed below, see note 26 above. On Berkeley's rejection of Locke's simple ideas, see Winkler, op. cit., ch. 3.

29 *Religious Studies* anonymous referee correctly notes that, in order for the hypothesis here discussed to be even remotely plausible, a detailed theory of mereology would be needed. If just any piece of any object counted as a “word” then there would in fact be, as the referee says, “A particular mind ... behind every sensory minimum.” (And perhaps also 'super-minds' composed of those minds?) I would like to point out, however, that if a theory of mereology (which, if sense perception is a language, will likely be closely related to the theory of *morphology*) could be developed, then a hypothetical proponent of the monadist hypothesis might be able to claim that a table represented a single mind, but the pieces of the table were just that – pieces – and not independent perceptual entities representing independent minds. The development of such a theory cannot be attempted here.

30 Arthur Schopenhauer uses this line of reasoning in arguing that the Kantian thing-in-itself is in fact a will (or at least something to be understood on analogy to will) in *The World as Will and Representation* sect. 18.

31 Or at least with some plausible interpretations of Leibniz.

32 Compare Descartes' famous “God is not a deceiver” argument in, e.g., the *Fourth Meditation*.

33 *Religious Studies'* anonymous referee suggests that the monadist hypothesis runs into the same criticism Berkeley makes against Malebranche's occasionalism at *Principles* 68ff. and, especially, *Dialogues* 218-220: namely, that the substances which are supposed to be the referents of our perceptions are unnecessary for accomplishing God's purposes with regard to minds. He or she further suggests that this objection is more important from a Berkeleian perspective than the objection I have presented in the text. While this objection is certainly available to Berkeley, I think that it is less decisive than the one I have outlined in the text. This is because these substances are minds or mind-like things and, as such, they may be ends in themselves for God just as human minds are.

34 James P. Danaher, “Is Berkeley's World a Divine Language?” *Modern Theology* 18 (July 2002): 361-372.

35 *ibid.* 370.

36 *loc. cit.*

37 I thank *Religious Studies'* anonymous referee for this extremely important objection, which I initially missed and which led to the development of the ideas in this paragraph.

38 “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork.” (Psalm 19:1, NKJV).

39 Sect. 3.3, above.

40 This is slightly problematic since our intuitions about artificial intelligences do not here agree with our intuitions about animals, although communications between artificial intelligences might have the same form and be perceived in the same way as communications between animals.

41 The centurion of Matthew 8 and the Canaanite woman of Matthew 15.

42 Danaher, *op. cit.*, 371.