# Review of *Language and the Structure of Berkeley's World*

### *Language and the Structure of Berkeley's World* Kenneth L. Pearce, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

By Gene Callahan

New York University

Kenneth L. Pearce has produced a fascinating new work exploring how Berkeley's views of language inform his immaterialism and his epistemology. His central thesis is that for Berkeley, the perceived world is, in fact, a discourse in a language -- what language, we shall see later -- and that our own talk about things like bodies, causes, and forces seek to reflect the architecture of that discourse. Pearce contends that "in this way, Berkeley succeeds in preserving the common sense and scientific structure of the world" (3) while holding to an immaterialist metaphysics. Thus, as Pearce interprets Berkeley, entities like bodies and forces are linguistic constructs, "part of our project of interpreting the language of nature" (3).

Pearce describes his method of proceeding as "intellectual history in the service of philosophy" (3). By this, he means he aims to follow a middle path between a purely analytical approach to the "Great Dead Philosohper's" ideas, which treats them ahistorically, as if they were a submission to a recent conference on ontology or epistemology, and a purely historical approach, which focuses only on the context of those ideas. Although he seeks a balance, he insists that "the contextual must precede the analytic" (4). This is so, he argues, because these figures *really are* great philosophers, and therefore "the positions they actually held" and "the arguments they actually made," when understood within the context of "the arguments and positions to which [they were] responding", are superior to how they might appear based on "a casual reading of a handful of well-known texts" (4).

Pearce begins by laying out Berkeley's attack on the "Theory of Meanings", by which is meant the notion that "every significant name stands for an idea" (8). This theory was "'received opinion' in Berkeley's day" (8), and this is what he set out to dispute at the beginning of *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. Berkeley was motivated here by his conviction that this theory undermined belief in religious mysteries, but rather than confine his assault to that domain, he argued that "as an attempt to make sense of mind, language, and knowledge, the Theory of Meaning is a total failure" (12).

Per Pearce, Berkeley opens his attack the Theory of Meanings by examining the case of words like "triangle", which are said to represent abstract ideas. But Berkeley makes a phenomenological case that we cannot really conceive of such things as abstract ideas. But why, then, do people suppose they exist? Berkeley pins the blame on the Theory of Meanings: since the word "triangle" is meaningful, and corresponds to no *particular* idea, it must instead correspond to an *abstract* one, so they think. But that conclusion is only necessary *if* we accept the Theory of Meanings! To the contrary, Berkeley holds, "there are meaningful uses of language where the aim is to do something other than excite an idea, such as evoke an emotion or a practical response" (15). Since "general words such as 'triangle' are paradigmatic examples of meaningful bits of language... The linguistic conventions that make words meaningful must therefore not consist merely in a a mapping of words to meanings" (15).

Further, for Berkeley, these supposed abstract ideas do not do the work they are supposed to do: if we state that the interior angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees, we are saying something about *all* particular triangles, and not about "some mysterious entity, The Universal Triangle" (28). The latter (fictitious) entity plays no actual role in understanding this geometrical theorem. General words, such as "line", gain their meaningfulness not by being signs of an abstract idea of "line", but by being signs of "all particular lines that may possibly exist" (35). To make some claim about "lines" is to state something that will apply to each and every particular line, and not something that applies to an "abstract" line.

Contrary to the Theory of Meanings, only a small portion of human language usage is concerned solely with the communication of meanings. Instead, much of our discourse is aimed at eliciting some emotion, or advising for or against some course of action, or of simply creating some particular state of mind. But, for Berkeley, there is "no sharp distinction between 'cognitive' and 'emotive' language" (55): all of our discourse contains some mix of each aspect.

In the chapter on rules and rule-following, we discover Berkeley as a proto-Wittgenstein, recognizing that humans often follow rules implicitly, many times without knowing how to even state the rule they are following. They do so by "suggestion", which anticipates Wittgenstein's insight that the ability to follow a rule depends upon participation in "a way of life". In the same vein, Berkeley also recognizes that "some implicit rule-following must... be prior to any explicit rule-following" (73). And, as a proto-Ryle, Berkeley recognizes that following a rule "is really an ability, or a kind of know-*how*" (75).

We also find that Berkeley anticipated C.S. Peirce's division of signs into indices, icons, and symbols, as he contended that one idea can suggest another "by likeness [icon], by necessary connexion [index]... or by arbitrary convention [symbol]" (69). (The correspondence is not exact, however, since Berkeley includes a fourth category he calls "geometrical inference".)

The upshot of this chapter is that since, for Berkeley, "only rule-following can underlie genuine regularity", it follows that "the laws of nature can be nothing other than the rules followed by God" (75). "'Force', 'gravity', 'attraction', and similar terms are useful for reasoning, and for calculations about motion and moving bodies" (84), but they do not reflect ultimate, metaphysical realities, unlike "the nouns used in metaphysics and theology" (85).

As noted above, Berkeley famously held that there are no abstract general ideas. General words are *labels*, but labels that, rather than being applied to a particular thing, are, according to some rule, applied to a number of particular things which all share some resemblance. Berkeley's famous claim that "*esse* is *percipi*" is true for him because "exists" is such a label, and there cannot sensibly be a rule that directs us to apply that label to something unperceived by any mind.   
Forces, such as gravity, exist for Berkeley as theoretical constructions made by physicists to help them model nature, and not as part of "the very truth of things" (95).

For Berkeley, the belief in the existence of bodies possessing a stable essence arises due to the same sort of muddle that leads to positing forces as really existing entities; as Pearce puts it: "The materialist is confused about plain language *in just the same way* the physical realist is confused about the formal language of physics" (102). In both cases, the fact that it is *useful* to apply a general label to certain collections of sensory experience can mistakenly lead to the idea that there are actual things being so labelled. However, "*bodies, like forces, are mere quasi-entities*" (97).

But if bodies are verbal constructs, how can we be sure if we are looking at a real horse or an imaginary unicorn? Fortunately, Berkeley's stance does not at all imply that we can't distinguish "between realities and chimeras", because "the ideas of sense... have *more reality* in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly, and coherent than the creatures of the mind" (120).

When it comes to spirits, we find Berkeley as an early methodological dualist. As Pearce writes, "Actions and spirits are known only in a sense of 'known' entirely different from the sense in which ideas and bodies can be said to be 'known'" (126). But how do we get this knowledge of spirits? Well, "we know other spirits by our own soul, which in that sense is the image or idea of them" (127). What spirits do is act, and just "as sensible qualities are known in the sensing of them, so actions are known in the *doing* of them" (127). Actions words are genuine referring words because we know our own actions directly by performing them, and can those label them with words. And the resemblance of others' actions to our own allows us to extend those labels to those actions as well. Nevertheless, there is an important difference in our labeling of sensible qualities from our labeling of spirits; Berkeley writes: "being an agent cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever" (129).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Pearce's work is how he unravels Berkeley's view of the truth of Christianity. Berkeley holds that both in ordinary and scientific language, "assent without ideas is a widespread phenomenon" (152). We assent to language that does not correspond to any idea when such assent enables to get on better in the world, e.g., we use the languages of "forces", even though we have no idea corresponding to "a force", because by doing so we are better able to predict the motion of objects in space. Similarly, to say, for instance, that one "believes" in the doctrine of the trinity is to assent to having one's life shaped by such a notion, and the "truth" of such language consists in the fact that those who truly assent to have their lives shaped by it thereby lead better lives. Or, as Pearce puts it regarding another belief, "The doctrine of the divinity of Christ produces a practical, interpersonal attitude *toward Christ*" (154).

Pearce notes that Berkeley's view is that the truth of any individual proposition can only be evaluated based on "its role in a broader sign system": once again, we find Berkeley as a precursor of later philosophical developments; in this case, it is the coherence theory of truth embraced by later British idealists.

As we have seen, for Berkeley, "bodies" are linguistic constructions built up from our phenomenal experience, and that causal talk, in everyday life and in physics, is an extension of that sort of operation. But Berkeley does not therefore dismiss such talk. The reason is twofold:

1. First of all, to model things this way is useful: it helps us "in the pursuit of happiness, which is the ultimate end and design... that sets rational agents at work" (204).
2. But these ideas are also true, in an important sense: they reflect the underlying reality of "the regular ordering of ideas instituted by God, i.e., the linguistic or grammatical structure of the divine language of nature. Our talk about bodies aims to capture the lexicon of this language, and our talk about causes, laws, and forces aims to capture its syntax" (204). And that, for Pearce, explains how Berkeley can be both an immaterialist and a common-sense realist.

Pearce has penned an important new contribution to Berkeley scholarship, one that aims to clear up many of the supposed paradoxes in Berkeley's thought that have puzzled other scholars. This reviewer believes he has largely succeeded in that task. But whether or not one accepts that conclusion, this is a work that cannot be ignored in future work on this "Great Dead Philosopher."