‘DRAWING THE CURTAIN OF WORDS’: A STRICT INTERPRETATION OF BERKELEY’S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

S. Seth Bordner

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy.

Chapel Hill
2010

Approved by:
William G. Lycan
Alan J. Nelson
Ram Neta
C. D. C. Reeve
Tad Schmaltz
ABSTRACT

S. SETH BORDNER: ‘Drawing the Curtain of Words’: A Strict Interpretation of Berkeley’s Philosophy of Language and Its Consequences
(Under the direction of Alan J. Nelson)

Berkeley is commonly interpreted as having thought that sensible objects have a continuous existence when unperceived by finite minds; that this continuity is constituted by God’s constant perception; that sensible objects are collections of ideas perceived at many different times by many different minds; and that, despite all appearances, this is all consonant with what commonsense says. I argue that all of these interpretive claims are false, and that we have not yet come to grips with the bulk of Berkeley’s actual metaphysical views.

The key to uncovering Berkeley’s actual views is to understand his account of language. I defend a novel interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy of language and then apply this account to dissolve some familiar problems related to his metaphysics. Berkeley has a pluralistic view about the ends of language, but he also thinks that significant philosophical statements must express coherent ideas. That is, Berkeley holds a hybrid ideational theory of language. In part, this means that Berkeley’s epistemology is fundamental. For the ideas one’s words stand for are Berkeleian ideas; particular, determinate (i.e., not abstract), private, mind-dependent, sensory ideas. This has implications for how we understand a number of Berkeleian views: that we immediately perceive sensible objects; that
sensible objects are collections of ideas; that sensible objects, though mind-dependent, exist continuously even when no finite mind perceives them. I argue that Berkeley held a radically nominalist account of sensible objects; Berkeleian sensible objects are just the particular ideas picked out by a name-token.

The principal roadblock to a nominalist interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy is the worry that it conflicts with claims that his system is consistent with, and even more, a defense of commonsense. I show that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is misunderstood; he is not defending commonly believed propositions, but fending off what he sees as the dangerous philosophy of materialism which he considers a threat to the normal credulity and faithfulness of “the vulgar,” for whom the perceived world is the real world. Berkeley’s radical nominalism is therefore integral to this project since it eliminates any gap between what is and what is perceived.
To my wife, Michelle;

my mother, De;

and my sister, Kelly;

for their support.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has benefited greatly from the input of many people, but none more than Alan Nelson. To him I owe the greatest thanks, not just for his support and counsel, but for his friendship.

I extend special thanks to the other members of the examination committee—Bill Lycan, Ram Neta, David Reeve, and Tad Schmaltz—for selflessly and unhesitatingly agreeing to take on what would otherwise be the thankless task of reading a dissertation.

Portions of this dissertation began life as separate papers. The first draft of what became Chapter 3 was written for a seminar taught by Nicholas Jolley in 2004 at the University of California, Irvine. I’m grateful to Nick for his encouragement and helpful feedback on this early work, as well as to the Department there for its support during my three-year tenure at UCI. A much more recent version was presented at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division meeting in New York in 2009. I was fortunate enough to have Sukjae Lee and Kenneth Winkler both comment on the paper there, and I thank them both. I also want to thank Dick Brook, Georges Dicker, and Tom Lennon for their probing questions and helpful suggestions at that meeting and afterward.

The first draft of Chapter 4 was written for presentation at the International Berkeley Society meeting in Newport, RI in June 2008. I thank Stephen Daniel for organizing the conference, and the audience for their helpful comments, particularly Melissa Frankel, Thomas Lennon, and Samuel Rickless. More recently, a version was presented at the American Philosophical Association’s Pacific Division meeting in San Francisco in 2010. I’m
particularly grateful to Becko Copenhaver, Lex Newman, and John Russell Roberts for their constructive comments and criticism there. My thanks also to D. Kenneth Brown, Ram Neta, David Reeve, Kurt Smith, and two anonymous referees for the Journal of the History of Philosophy for reading and commenting on earlier drafts.

More recently, a version of Chapter 2 was presented at the Pacific Northwest/Western Canada Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia. I thank Lisa Shapiro and the SFU Philosophy Department for a superbly organized conference, and to Michael Della Rocca, Karolina Hübner, Dominik Perler, Michael Rosenthal, and Amy Schmitter for their penetrating questions and constructive feedback.

Dissertations are difficult things to write. Well, that may not be true of all of them, but this dissertation was a difficult thing for me to write. I sincerely doubt I could or would have accomplished the feat without the saint-like patience and support of my wife, Michelle. This work is for her, even if she never reads a word of it.
# Table of Contents

## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapters

1. **The Hybrid Ideational Theory of Language**
   - 1.1. A Lockeian Lineage ............................................... 12
   - 1.2. The Lockeian View of Language .................................. 13
   - 1.3. Signification .......................................................... 19
   - 1.4. Ideas as Images ....................................................... 22
   - 1.5. Berkeley’s Short-Lived Lockeian Period ......................... 24
   - 1.6. Abstract Ideas .......................................................... 26
   - 1.7. The End(s) of Language ............................................... 31
   - 1.8. A Preliminary Summary ............................................... 32
   - 1.9. How Far Does He Go? .................................................. 33
   - 1.10. “... at bottom they have no meaning in them.” ................ 35
   - 1.11. The Hybrid Ideational Theory .................................... 38

2. **Berkeley’s Radically Nominalism**
   - 2.1. A Matter of Matter, In Brief ....................................... 42
   - 2.2. Houses, Mountains, and Rivers ..................................... 43
   - 2.3. The Puzzle of Immediacy ............................................. 45
   - 2.4. A Simple Case of Modus Ponens .................................... 48
3. THE PROBLEM OF CONTINUITY ................................................. 66
   3.1 A GUIDED TOUR OF THE PROBLEM ................................ 68
   3.2 RADICAL NOMINALISM REDUX ...................................... 80
   3.3 REGULARITIES IN THE GAPS .......................................... 88
   3.4 PUTTING THE ‘PROBLEM’ TO REST ..................................... 94
4. BERKELEY’S ‘DEFENSE’ OF ‘COMMONSENSE’ ......................... 97
   4.1 WHAT IS BERKELEY DEFENDING? ................................... 100
   4.2 HOW IS BERKELEY DEFENDING ‘COMMONSENSE’? .............. 110
   4.3 PAPPAS’S PROPOSITIONAL ACCOUNT ............................... 119
   4.4 PROBLEMS FOR PAPPAS ............................................... 123
   4.5 ROBERTS’S RELIGIOUS IMAGE ....................................... 126
   4.6 RESPONSE TO ROBERTS ............................................... 129
   4.7 LETTING BERKELEY BE BERKELEY .................................. 130
REFERENCES .............................................................................. 134
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: “Trickle-down” approach to the standard view ........................................ 81

Figure 2: “Bubble-up” approach to the standard view ............................................. 83

Figure 3: Radically Nominalist account ............................................................... 85
INTRODUCTION: A SYMPATHETIC INTERPRETATION

This is probably the only dissertation in the history of philosophy to begin with a story about a comedian and a car. Here it is:

When funnyman and inimitable car aficionado Jay Leno pulled a 1927 Duesenberg Model X out of the garage in Burbank, CA where it had lain undisturbed for nearly 40 years, he had a choice to make.

The car was one of only thirteen of its kind, of which only four were known to still exist, and this one was the last one ever made. It was unbelievably valuable—easily worth more than $1,000,000 were it in good condition. The car’s rarity was only one reason for its incredible value. Duesenbergs were not only rare cars, they were astonishingly powerful, innovative, brilliantly designed cars. A Duesenberg won the Indianapolis 500 in 1924, 1925, and 1927. By 1928, the model SJ had a top speed of 140 miles per hour when most cars couldn’t reach 100. Their powerful reputation lingers in our lingo even today. Some say the phrase, “It’s a doozie!” (or “Duesey!”) originated with the make, because no other automobile could match the power and quality of a Duesenberg. Jay’s new find was also mothballed for 40 years because, as he said, “somebody had done a horrible job of messing with the engine,” leaving behind fatally broken timing gears and valve springs.

But what do you do with a broken, neglected, 80 year-old, potentially million-dollar car? Leaving it as-is was never an option; one does not collect classic cars to let them sit, broken, collecting dust. Among car buffs, though, there are two schools of thought about how to treat old cars. Some think that classic cars are first and foremost classic cars, and that
their being classics should take a back seat to their being the best cars they can be. These hot-rod-ers see old cars as used canvases on which to apply new paint and new technology, combining modern substance with classic form. The results are newer, faster, strange, and sometimes wonderful creations that bear only superficial resemblances to their originals. Hot rods are less restored than remade or renewed, with great emphasis on new.

Others see classic cars as primarily classics, not simply because they are old but because they are ancestors of today's cars. They not only provide us a glimpse as to how things were then, they also help explain how things got to be how they are now. Originalists see classics as testaments to the ingenuity of their designers, who were relatively constrained by limited resources and technology. Classic cars are examples of how designers dealt with challenges, and the solutions they arrived at, for the most part, remain models for some of the most advanced vehicles we have today.

In the end, Jay decided on what he called a sympathetic restoration. This meant returning the Model X as close as possible to its original condition, as much as possible using original methods and materials. It also meant that once the engine was repaired and running, there would be no further extensive renovations—not even a new paint job. The last remaining Model X would remain, through and through, a Model X. The result is one of the finest, most authentic examples of the genius and foresight of the early days of the automotive industry.

What does any of this have to do with philosophy?

The broad aim of this work is to present and defend an interpretation of the philosophy of George Berkeley. It is a work in the history of philosophy, and any historical project presents one with a choice not unlike the choice presented to Mr. Leno by the Model X: what do you do with this old thing?
The parallels between philosophical interpretation and automotive restoration are surprisingly apt, to an extent. Like classic cars, the great dead philosophers are intellectual ancestors to their present day counterparts. Studying them likewise provides us with both a view as to how the past was and a better idea of how the present came to be. The great dead philosophers represent particularly important moments in the history of our discipline. Like early carmakers, they were each constrained by their own peculiar limitations and directed at their individual goals, and their systems developed as a function of these pressures. In many cases, they still serve as paradigms for our most modern theories, or at the very least, as the source of the terms of debate.

Berkeley in particular was a Duesey of a philosopher. The automobile changed transportation as much as the new “way of ideas” changed philosophy, and the Duesenberg and Berkeley were each early stars in their burgeoning traditions. Berkeley’s system was dramatically innovative; his theory of vision, in particular, was nothing short of revolutionary. Despite this, Berkeley had few adherents, and his standing was quickly overshadowed by the great Hume and Kant, much as Duesenberg ultimately faded behind the industrial juggernauts of Ford, General Motors, and Daimler-Benz. There might be fewer Berkeleian Idealists today than there are running Duesenbergs, yet his legacy is evident in pop culture, movies, jokes, and the name of a university of some note.

---

1 Not for nothing did Alfred North Whitehead write that all philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato. See Whitehead (1960) 39.


3 Of course, I mean the University of California, Berkeley. However, John Perry has recently and very humorously denied that UC-Berkeley is actually named after the good Bishop Berkeley. Perry said in the Claire Miller Lecture at the 42nd Chapel Hill Colloquium (I’m paraphrasing), “Berkeley [the university] was originally named after Berkeley [the philosopher], but no longer. It used to be the University of California, Berkeley. It is now the University of California at Berkeley, so it is named after the town of Berkeley, which was named for the university it grew up around, the University of California, Berkeley, which was named after [the philosopher] Berkeley.”
There is a divide among philosophers interested in historical figures analogous to the one among classic car enthusiasts. Some see historical philosophers as worth studying to the extent that what they had to say is relevant or useful to us today. What is not true in them is “dead,” and what is dead is unimportant; our job as philosophers is to “display the life below the surface” to help advance our own contemporary projects.\(^4\)

I certainly agree that studying historical philosophers can help contribute to contemporary projects, but I reject the implication that only what is acceptable by today’s standards in the systems of the great dead philosophers is worth paying attention to. And I would hasten to add that discerning what is true in the systems of a great dead philosopher requires first discerning what is in the systems.

This is not easy. It is not easy for all the same reasons that clearly understanding any contemporary philosopher is not easy, and for others as well. We are removed from historical philosophers by time, language, worldview, ideology, and scientific background. These all make forming a clear picture of their views harder (though we might have differences along these lines with a contemporary), but what’s worse, we cannot simply ask them for clarification. We have only their texts to go on, along with whatever circumstantial knowledge we have of their time, place, and intellectual environment. And so on the opposite side of this divide are those who see that primary value in studying the history of philosophy as historical; the history of philosophy is important as history, and whether all or any of that history is “dead” by contemporary standards is irrelevant.

I will not argue here that one way of approaching the history of philosophy is more

\(^4\) See Jonathan Bennett (1968) 340. Bennett opens with this: “Most of the Critique of Pure Reason is prima facie dead, because prima facie dependent upon wholly indefensible theories.” For Bennett, the ‘vitality’ of a philosophical work is apparently commensurate with its level of contemporary believability. I quote Bennett because he is the clearest proponent of this type of view, not the only one.
valuable than another. I will not even claim that one way is easier than another. The two approaches can be advantageous to each other, and together, enrich the discipline as a whole. Nor are they exclusive of one another; an historical project need not be entirely focused on the historical minutiae or the relevance to contemporary debates. Indeed, an interpretation that is completely concerned with one or the other is likely to suffer as a result.

This work is likewise a mix of both motivations, but it falls close to the latter, historical approach than the other. It is an attempt at what I call a sympathetic interpretation. The primary aim of this work is to provide a novel interpretation of the central elements of Berkeley’s philosophy. I will argue that these are his theory of ideas, his philosophy of language, and the account of the metaphysics of ordinary objects that these generate. This is a “sympathetic” interpretation the way that Jay Leno’s restoration of the Duesenberg was sympathetic; the aim is to produce a picture of Berkeley’s philosophy that is, as much as possible, faithful to his written works and their historical context, irrespective of whether this picture would be acceptable as a contemporary theory. An interpretation will count as successful, on this approach, if it can show that Berkeley’s conclusions are defensible when considered in context with the intellectual landscape of his day; i.e., his inherited philosophical commitments, the state of science at the time, etc.

A sympathetic interpretation need not ignore questions of contemporary relevance, however. Indeed, as I suggested above, the questions might best be answered in light of a sympathetic interpretation; it is only after we have determined what Berkeley’s philosophy is that we can begin to answer questions about how relevant his philosophy is, and how it fares by contemporary standards. That said, I do not mean to suggest that this sympathetic interpretation will provide a picture of Berkeley’s philosophy that fares particularly well by
contemporary standards. Even if, as I argue, the true shape of Berkeley’s system has not been appreciated before now, Berkeley’s philosophy is still fundamentally Idealist and theocentric, and so will be no more popular in contemporary debates than any other Idealist, theo-centric view (which is to say, not very much). But the view developed here will show, in ways perhaps unappreciated before, that Berkeley’s thought has surprising relevance to contemporary debates nonetheless. The peculiar limitations of his theory of ideas, combined with his philosophy of language, illustrate a fundamental challenge to any account of language that ties meaning to a psychological entity as, for example, Gricean accounts appear to do. And Berkeley’s way of dealing with the potential skeptical consequences of his account of sensible objects points the way to an austere empiricist challenge to the more moderate empiricisms of Quine or van Fraassen. In short, there is much we can learn from Berkeley, even if we ultimately reject his Idealism.

The sympathetic interpretation begins in Chapter 1 where Berkeley’s first great work begins: with his criticisms of the Lockean account of language and the doctrine of abstract ideas that Berkeley takes to be driven by it. We will see that Berkeley rejected the simple view espoused by Locke and adopted a pluralist account of the ends of language, along with a plurality of criteria for linguistic success. Most importantly, though, was Berkeley’s modification of the Lockean ideational theory of meaning, what I call Berkeley’s hybrid ideational theory, on which words (employed in some linguistic practices) become meaningful by designating or signifying ideas in the mind of the speaker. Seeing how this

---

5 By Idealism, I denote any type of positive metaphysical view on which the most fundamental entities are only thinking things; minds, spirits, monads, what have you. Among the early Moderns, Berkeley and Leibniz are clearly Idealists by this definition, while Descartes might arguably be classified as one as well (if one takes God to be both most fundamental and only a thinking thing). Though they are often conflated, I distinguish Idealism from another Berkeleian view, namely, immaterialism, which I take to be the denial that there is any such thing as (or anything answering to the name of) “matter.” Berkeley is both an Idealist and an immaterialist.
theory applies in light of Berkeley’s own unique theory of ideas will provide the interpretive key for understanding a host of other features of his philosophical system.

One such feature is Berkeley’s account of sensible objects. This is the focus of Chapter 2. Berkeley’s claims about sensible objects are (pardon the pun) sensational—sensible objects are nothing but collections or “congeries” of ideas, which ideas exist only so long as they are perceived. The esse of sensible objects is percipi—for them to be is for them to be perceived. This is perhaps Berkeley’s most famous dictum, and one of his most puzzling. For, it seems to entail that what we regard as single physical objects are metaphysically many. And on a natural reading of Berkeley’s theory of ideas, it seems to entail that the object you perceive is numerically distinct from the object I perceive, and that the object you see now is numerically distinct from the one you saw a moment ago. Add to these concerns Berkeley’s apparently inconsistent claims about the immediacy of our perception of sensible objects and one begins to wonder whether Berkeley has a coherent account of sensible objects at all. I argue that he does have a coherent account and the way to uncovering it is through an application of the hybrid ideational theory of language. We will find that the puzzles mentioned above are pseudo-puzzles generated by the surface grammar of language. These pseudo-puzzles disappear when we follow Berkeley’s advice and move past the appearances of language—when we “draw the curtain of words.” Applying the hybrid ideational theory, we find that Berkeley’s account of sensible objects is radically nominalist—the collections of ideas that he calls ‘sensible objects’ are just those ideas signified by sensible object word-tokens.

In Chapter 3, we will see how the radically nominalist account of sensible objects gives us the resources to, once and for all, dissolve the most enduring puzzle in Berkeley’s philosophy: if the esse of sensible objects is percipi, what is Berkeley’s position on sensible
objects that we believe to exist unperceived? The most well known answer to this question invokes God’s perception, receiving its most colorful expression in the limerick by Msgr. Ronald Knox and its reply:

There once was a man who said “God
Must find it exceedingly odd
If He finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there’s no one about in the Quad.”

Reply:

“Dear Sir, Your astonishment’s odd:
I am always about in the Quad.
And that’s why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God.”

Since sensible objects depend for their existence on the perception of a mind, and since (so this line goes) sensible objects often exist independent of the perception of any particular finite mind, their continuous existence must be preserved by the ever-watchful perception of God.

Things are not quite so simple, however, for there are good reasons to resist the claim that Berkeley’s God perceives in a manner that is either necessary or sufficient for ensuring that sensible objects have a continuous existence. This is not a problem, however, for the hybrid ideational theory can be brought to bear on this issue as well. If we keep strictly to Berkeley’s theory of language and the radically nominalist account of sensible objects that it generates, we find that the entire issue of continuity is another pseudo-puzzle. Berkeleian sensible objects do, in one sense, have a continuous existence, but the radically nominalist account shows that this kind of continuity does not require the existence of any ideas perceived by God in the gaps between the times when finite minds perceive given objects. Nor does it require an appeal to unanalyzed counterfactual conditionals as do even
the most well worked out phenomenalist interpretations do. Indeed, what the radically
nominalist account shows is that, on Berkeley’s theory of language, a problem of continuity
cannot even be coherently formulated.

An interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy that can provide a coherent picture of his
metaphysics of sensible objects and dissolve away internal tensions (to the degree this is
possible) is clearly desirable. This account has the potential to do just that, but one might
say, only at the expense of undercutting one of the other most important aspects of
Berkeley’s philosophy—his defense of commonsense. Before Reid or even Hume, Berkeley
championed himself as the philosopher of commonsense: “I side in all things with the
Mob,” he famously writes. If the hybrid ideational theory of language and the radically
nominalist account of sensible objects are to be accepted as viable interpretations of
Berkeley’s philosophy, there must be an explanation of how these strikingly unorthodox
views mesh with Berkeley’s frequent, public claims to be, in some way, on the side of
commonsense and a friend to “the Vulgar.” This is the focus of Chapter 4.

Not only is there such an explanation, but it is in fact generated by the hybrid
ideational theory itself. For it is Berkeley’s recognition of the connection between the
Vulgar’s insulation from skepticism and their pedestrian linguistic tendencies that pointed
the way to his rejection of the Locke theory of language. What we will see is that
Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is much different than traditionally understood. It is not
a defense-cum-apology for any and all commonly held opinions, but an attack against what
Berkeley sees as a skeptical threat to the Vulgar and Learned alike. The threat is
representative realism in all forms, particularly Locke materialism, and Berkeley aims to
destroy it from the foundation: the doctrine of abstraction. So, far from being at odds with
the rest of the interpretation, Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is in fact of a piece with
the hybrid ideational theory and the radically nominalist account of sensible objects, for they share the attack on abstract ideas as their common core.
This dissertation is *amazing*.

By this, I do not mean to be evaluating its quality as a work in the history of philosophy, or to be remarking on the achievement of having written something of such a size, or on such a topic. Its quality will be evaluated by people who know better than I, and while it took me great pains to write it, others have written far longer, and very likely, far better dissertations.

Rather, I mean that it is amazing that anything like it exists at all. It is, in print, a conglomeration of squiggly lines on thin sheets of bleached tree pulp. And yet they are not merely squiggly lines, for they have the remarkable property of meaning something. Not all of them, mind you—here are some squiggly lines that mean nothing at all:

(1)  S’bnAk;wW ph~!TLvis eE?eQaäur.

(2)  Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.\(^6\)

Nevertheless, most of the squiggly lines in this dissertation *do* mean something and that’s an amazing fact when one considers how strange it is that squiggly lines manage to mean *anything at all*.

This notion of meaning is at once perfectly obvious and astonishingly difficult to understand. We know that most of the sentences in this dissertation have it. We know that (1) and (2) don’t. We even know that both (1) and (2) *might* have it under different circumstances, say, if they were part of an esoteric code or an alien language. This knowledge

\(^6\) Not only is this a nonsensical sentence, it’s a famous nonsensical sentence, first appearing in Noam Chomsky’s groundbreaking 1957 *Syntactic Structures*. 
is all quite ordinary. Knowing what all these squiggles mean is another, more difficult matter. We learn to recognize written language before we learn to read it as language. But all of this is, quite literally, child’s play compared to understanding how these squiggles—and the noises I would make if I were reading them out loud—mean what we know they mean. Let us call this the Puzzle of Meaning: how do words and sentences get their meaning?

The aim of this chapter is to describe the peculiar answer Berkeley gives to the Puzzle of Meaning. This is important, I will argue, because the way Berkeley thinks words acquire meaning informs a great deal of his larger philosophical system and properly understanding this aspect of his thought is key to resolving a number of long-standing interpretive puzzles.

1.1: A LOCKEAN LINEAGE

I take it as an interpretive axiom that Berkeley—and any historical philosopher, for that matter—can be best understood within his historical context, as reading and responding to his contemporaries. We know from his notebooks that Berkeley read widely, but we also know that no one of his contemporaries dominated his thought more than John Locke, so much so that it is not an overstatement to say that nearly every facet of Berkeley’s philosophical system is a reaction to, or otherwise influenced by, Locke’s philosophy.⁷

⁷This claim is indeed so uncontroversial I have relatively little to say in its defense. Of course, to what extent Berkeley reacted to or was influenced by Locke is a matter of some dispute, but there is underlying agreement among scholars that there was some such influence and that it pervades nearly all of Berkeley’s thought. The reader may satisfy herself that this is so by consulting a few competent reviews of Berkeley’s works, but if you are willing to be persuaded by evidence that requires less ambition on your part, I offer you the following circumstantial evidence. By 1707 when Berkeley produced his first philosophical work, Of Infinites, all the major works of Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Malebranche, and Leibniz had been published save Leibniz’s Theodicy (1710) and Monadology (1714). And yet in the entirety of Berkeley’s corpus, Descartes is mentioned by name only two dozen times; Hobbes only 18 times; Malebranche, 16 times; Spinoza, 15 times; Leibniz, a mere dozen times. Locke, on the other hand, is mentioned by name nearly 70 times throughout Berkeley’s writings. Even where Locke is not named, he is often clearly the subject of conversation, such as in the Introduction to the Principles of Human Knowledge where Berkeley criticizes the work of “a late deservedly esteemed philosopher”, one who happens to be the author of a certain Essay on Human Understanding (PHK, Intro §11). Of course
Nowhere is this reaction more evident, or more violent, than on the issue of language. It would be fair to say that on this issue, Berkeley is focused exclusively on Locke. So, before we can properly understand Berkeley’s views, we must first understand the views he was influenced by and responding to. This means first understanding Locke’s views, or rather, what Berkeley *took to be* Locke’s views. This last caveat is crucial. Claims that Berkeley misunderstood Locke’s actual views are quite common. Unfortunately, they are also not without merit. Berkeley was, by all accounts, an honest and virtuous man in private life, but he was a less-than-careful interpreter of his opponents. So, while a detailed exegesis of Locke’s own view is a valuable project in its own right, it is a project the scope of which lies well beyond my purposes here. Instead, I want to sketch Locke’s views on language in broad strokes, saving the detail work for seeing how Berkeley interpreted it. What is most important for our purposes is uncovering Berkeley’s views that are a reaction to his understanding of Locke’s views. Consequently I will not be concerned to answer definitively any questions regarding the accuracy of Berkeley’s understanding of Locke.

**1.2: The Lockeian View of Language**

Locke’s theory of language is best understood in its relationship to what he called his “Historical, plain Method.” The aim of Locke’s *Essay* is to make the human understanding

---


9 *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk. I, ch. i, sect. 2. Hereafter, citations to Locke’s *Essay* will take the form, *Essay* i.2. For a particularly interesting account of the historical plain method, see D. Kenneth Brown’s
itself a subject of study, to “enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge; together with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent.”

Laying aside questions about the metaphysics of the mind, his method involves tracing the ideas of the mind back to their origins in experience, thereby giving an account of how we come to think the ways we do. Success in the historical plain method would, Locke thinks, answers questions about the certainty of our putative knowledge and give us insight into the relative justification of beliefs found to be uncertain. Locke writes:

I shall imagine I have not wholly misemploy’d my self … if, in this Historical, plain Method, I can give any Account of the Ways, whereby our Understandings come to attain those Notions of Things we have, and can set down and Measures of the Certainty of our Knowledge, or the Grounds of those Perswasions, which are to be found amongst Men, so various, different, and wholly contradictory…

The account of language Locke presents in Book III of the Essay is an example of just such an effort to trace a uniquely human concern back to its origins. The origin of language stems from “God having designed Man for a sociable Creature.” Requiring a tool for organization and cooperation, man “had by Nature his Organs so fashioned as to be fit to frame articulate Sounds, which we call Words.” The ability to produce articulate sounds not being sufficient (supposedly) for the ends of organization and cooperation:

[I]t was farther necessary, that he should be able to use these Sounds, as Signs of internal Conceptions; and to make them stand as marks for the Ideas within his own Mind,
whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men's Minds be conveyed from one to another.\footnote{Ibid., original emphasis.}

Locke here expresses the first and most fundamental thesis of his philosophy of language, what I will call the Priority Thesis (PT):

\textbf{PT}: Thought is logically prior to language, language being a method of making one's thoughts known to others.

As Paul Guyer notes, Locke's endorsement of PT puts him in a tradition stretching back to Aristotle.\footnote{See Guyer (1994) 119. See also Aristotle, \textit{De Interpretatione}, 16a4-9.} We will see later that Berkeley falls squarely in the same tradition.

The Priority Thesis leaves open the question of how a language—or more precisely, a system of noises or symbols—'makes one's thoughts known to others.' A word might bear any number of relations to a thought. Locke thinks the relation is one of signification:

\textit{Words in their primary or immediate Signification, stand for nothing, but the Ideas in the Mind of him that uses them} \ldots\footnote{Essay III.ii.2.}

This is not helpful, for as Jonathan Bennett rightly points out, Locke simply helps himself to 'stand for' without explanation.\footnote{Bennett (1971) 3.} The question is one of meaning: words have meaning, but how? In virtue of what does the symbol (or the noise) 'cat' mean 'a member of the family \textit{Felidae}', when the very similar symbol 'cet' has no meaning at all. An appeal to the sign itself gives us no answer; there is nothing intrinsically meaningful about 'cat' such that English speakers use that symbol to mean 'a member of the family \textit{Felidae}' rather than 'cet.' Locke is at least vaguely aware of the puzzle, for he notes that parrots and other birds are capable of producing articulate sounds, of mimicking speech, but nevertheless fail to count as language.
users; that is, fail to mean anything by their noises. But as Locke states in the very first sentence of the Essay, “it is the Understanding that sets Man above the rest of sensible Beings.” So the difference between merely articulate sounds and meaningful articulate sounds—language—must likewise depend on our understanding. Thus, we can see that Locke takes the logical priority of thought as a necessary condition for a system of symbols to count as language. Noting this, we can look back at the claim about signification and distill a principle about meaning from it. I will call it the Significance Thesis (ST):

**ST:** A word is a meaningful if and only if it stands for an idea in the mind of the speaker (writer).

ST immediately raises a number of issues, the lingering question of what it is for a word to ‘stand for’ an idea principal among them. Equally problematic are the apparent implications of ST that for every meaningful word there must be a corresponding idea, and that the grammar of speech must depend on a compositionist grammar of ideas.

The first of these implications seems straightforward: if the addition or removal of a word from a sentence affects the meaning of the sentence, this must be because the word is meaningful. (Consider, for example, the effect of adding or removing the word ‘not’ from the sentence ‘I do [not] love you.’) Since it is meaningful, the word must stand for an idea in the mind of the speaker. This is an especially problematic consequence of ST for it would entail that logical connectives and prepositions must stand for ideas. If this were true, then it would follow that syncategorematic terms like ‘and’ and ‘is’ have meanings all by themselves, in virtue of the ideas they stand for, in exactly the same way the word ‘cat’ is meaningful even when uttered in isolation. Historically, this has been a non-starter, and Locke

---

19 See *Essay* III.i.1.

20 *Essay* I.i.1.
recognizes this. Later in *Essay* Book III, he writes:

> [T]here are a great many others (i.e., words) that are made use of, to signify the *connexion* that the Mind gives to *Ideas, or Propositions, one with another*. … The Words, whereby it signifies what connection it gives to the several Affirmations and Negations, that it unites in one continued Reasoning or Narration, are generally call’d *Particles* …

These particles however, “are not truly, by themselves, the names of any *Ideas.*” It would seem then that either Locke rejects that particles are meaningful (since on ST this would mean that they stand for ideas), or that he does not hold ST as strictly as it first appears. Some commentators choose to interpret Locke as implicitly restricting ST to exclude syncategorematic terms. According to Ott, ST is restricted to categorematic terms; “on [Locke’s] view, … the copula signifies not an idea but a mental act that unites the ideas in a mental proposition.” This is perhaps a less-than-desirable interpretation, for Locke is not shy about claiming ST holds for all ideas; “*all* words, as I have shewn, signify nothing immediately, but the Ideas in the Mind of the Speaker.” However, there may be a way through the horns of this dilemma. Recently, D. Kenneth Brown has defended a strict compositionalist interpretation of Locke’s theory of ideas. On Brown’s interpretation of Locke, all ideas are either absolutely simple or complex, and all complex ideas are (theoretically) analyzerable into absolutely simple ideas. All complex ideas are the products of some operation(s) of the mind. According to Brown, these operations produce complex

---


22 *Essay* III.vii.2.

23 Ott (2004) 34. See the rest of Ott (2004), chapter 2 as well.

24 *Essay*, III.iv.1, my emphasis.

ideas by adding new simple ideas of reflection; indeed, the addition of a simple idea to the resulting complex just is an operation. So, for example, to remember something is for the mind to produce a new complex idea by adding to an existing idea (either simple or complex) a simple idea of memory marking the new complex as remembered. Now, mental propositions, “wherein the Ideas in our Understanding are without the use of Words put together or separated by the Mind, perceiving, or judging of their Agreement, or Disagreement,” are necessarily complex and therefore involve one or more operations of the mind. On Brown’s view, though, an operation of the mind just is the production of a complex via the addition of a simple idea. So, while Ott is right that the copula, for example, stands for the mental act (operation) that unites ideas, he is wrong that it does not also signify an idea itself. For since, on Brown’s interpretation, the operation is exhausted by the addition of an idea to a new complex, the copula can stands for an operation only if it also stands for the simple idea thereby added. Brown’s strict interpretation allows us to preserve ST even with respect to syncategoremata. So, even particles can signify ideas, even if they are not, strictly speaking, “names” for them.

The second potentially problematic consequence of ST is equally straightforward. Consider these two sentences:

A: The cat ate the goldfish
B: The goldfish ate the cat.

Since both A and B contain exactly the same words, someone uttering A signifies exactly the same ideas they would signify if they uttered B. But since A and B are strikingly different in meaning, given PT and ST, this difference must be explained by some difference in the non-contentual features of the ideas, say, in the representational structure or ordering of the ideas.

26 Essay, IV.v.5.
in the mind of the speaker. Perhaps the difference is temporal (the cat idea is signified first in uttering A, second in uttering B) or, if ideas are images, it may even be spatial. Regardless, PT and ST combined commit Locke to some kind of isomorphism between the grammar of speech and the “grammar” of thought. Locke himself offers no account of the isomorphism. As we will see, however, one of the most problematic details of Locke’s philosophy of language depends upon the assumption of some kind of isomorphism and Berkeley exploits this flaw to great effect.

1.3: SIGNIFICATION

The view of language I am here reconstructing relies centrally on the concept of signification. Exactly what signification is, though, is not entirely clear— for Locke, Berkeley, or Berkeley’s understanding of Locke. We have so far only substituted for signification the equally unclear concept of ‘standing for’; a word signifies an idea just in case it ‘stands for’ said idea. According to Ott, Locke’s notion of signification is in line with a tradition running from the Port-Royalians through his near predecessor Thomas Hobbes.27 On this conception, a word signifies—that is, is a sign for—an idea insofar as it indicates or serves as evidence for the idea.28 Such indication or evidence can then serve as the grounds for certain inferences. Dark clouds indicate on-coming rain, and so one can infer the likelihood of rain from the sign of dark clouds. Likewise, a word is a sign of a speaker’s idea just in case a word indicates the presence of such an idea; that is, just in case the speaker has the idea in her mind when speaking the word.

This last might seem too fast. Must one really have an idea in mind when speaking a

---


28 Ibid., 24.
corresponding word in order for that word to signify that idea? After all, dark clouds are not always concomitant with rain, nor rain with dark clouds. Dark clouds are reliable but not infallible indicators of rain, but they remain a sign of rain nonetheless. Likewise, might not a word be a reliable but not infallible indicator of an idea, the utterance typically (but not always) coinciding with the idea’s occurrent perception? It seems not for Locke.

First, temporal coincidence of word and idea would seem to be necessary. Given Locke’s acceptance of PT, thought is logically prior to language. That is, one cannot meaningfully say what one cannot already think.

A Man cannot make his Words the Signs either of Qualities in Things, or of Conceptions in the Mind of another, whereof he has none in his own. Till he has some Ideas of his own, he cannot suppose them to correspond with the Conceptions of another Man; nor can he use any Signs for them: For thus they would be the Signs of he knows not what, which is in Truth to be the Signs of nothing.

But of all the thoughts a mature language user can think, which thoughts are signified by a given utterance? The answer cannot be “whichever thoughts the words used have, by convention, been made to stand for” since this only begs the question of how the convention was established if not by temporal association. Since words are not linked to the ideas they signify “by any natural connexion,” such as a resemblance, the choice of sign is arbitrary.

There was nothing special about the symbol ‘cat’ that English users chose it over ‘gatto’ (or ‘ghl!tm’) to mean cat. But the sign, once chosen, could not be wholly temporally disconnected to the occurrence of the speaker’s idea of a cat. If this were possible, then Locke would be committed to a view of language on which a person could be said to mean something by the noise ‘cat’ even if the noise were days, months, or even years removed

---

29 This is not surprisingly one of Berkeley’s worries, as we will soon see.

30 Essay, III.ii.2.

31 Essay, III.ii.1.
from the speaker’s thinking of a cat, presumably even if the speaker were talking in her sleep, 
or even if the speaker had only once thought of a cat and had long since then lost any trace 
of the idea. Unless signification required some temporal relation between word and idea, 
Locke’s theory would lack any resources for fixing the significatum of a word.

Given what Locke says, we have reason to think the temporal relation is quite strong. 
He writes:

Words, as they are used by Men, can properly and immediately signify nothing but the Ideas, that are in the Mind of the Speaker.32

Locke’s use of ‘idea’ is notoriously slippery, a fact he apologizes for.33 Nevertheless, even in the widest sense of the term, it denotes “whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks.”34 That is, in the strict sense there are no ideas that are not occurrently perceived. Locke even explicitly rejects the notion that previously perceived ideas are stored, unperceived, in the memory as mere metaphor:

[O]ur Ideas being nothing, but actual Perceptions in the Mind, which cease to be any thing, when there is no perception of them, this laying up of our Ideas in the Repository of the Memory, signifies no more but this, that the Mind has a Power, in many cases, to revive Perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional Perception annexed to them, that it has had them before. And in this Sense it is, that our Ideas are said to be in our Memories, when indeed, they are actually no where.35

We have good reasons then to conclude that on Locke’s view, words are meaningful just in case they stand for the speaker’s presently perceived ideas; words and the ideas they stand for must be (more or less) cotemporaneous. More importantly for our purposes, though, as we will see, this is how Berkeley understands Locke.

32 Essay, III.i.4.
33 Essay, I.i.8, emphasis mine.
34 Ibid., emphasis mine.
35 Essay, II.x.2.
1.4: IDEAS AS IMAGES

One remaining feature of Locke’s philosophy of language needs to be discussed before we can turn to Berkeley and his criticisms. Some of Berkeley’s most biting criticisms of Locke assume that Lockean ideas are images; as it were, little pictures (or other sensory analogues) before the mind. Berkeley was in good company in attacking (what he took to be) Locke’s imagism. While there is debate among Locke scholars on this question, this is not the place to enter into or mediate that dispute. Regardless, Berkeley is not unreasonable in reading Locke as an imagist, for much of what Locke writes suggests as much and his notorious imprecision does much to obscure the matter.

Though the distinction between “rationalists” and “empiricists” is hackneyed and over-simplified, Locke and Berkeley both reject the faculty of the pure intellect that plays a significant role in the systems of Descartes and other canonical rationalists. When, in the Second Meditation, Descartes investigates the nature of a piece of wax, he comes to understand that it is indefinitely mutable despite his being unable to imagine all the possible ways the wax could change. He concludes his understanding of the indefinitely changeable nature of the wax is “not achieved by the faculty of the imagination,” but “through the mind alone.” This opens the door for yet another Cartesian dualism; ideas of imagination and ideas of intellect, only the former being imagistic. Later, Descartes returns to the distinction,

36 Leibniz, for example, also attacks Locke as an imagist. See Leibniz’s New Essays on Human Understanding, Book II, chapter 29. See also Jolley (1999) 42-44.

37 Michael Ayers is a notable proponent of the imagistic interpretation. See Ayers (1991) chs. 5-7. See also Bennett (1971) 22. I find Brown’s anti-imagist strict interpretation compelling. See Brown (2006), 107-120.

38 See Garrett (1997) 11-21 for a survey of the place of the intellect in the early modern period.

39 Descartes, Meditations, AT 31
noting that while he can imagine triangles or pentagons, “if I desire to think of a chiliagon, I certainly conceive truly that it is a figure composed of a thousand sides, just as easily as I conceive of a triangle that it is a figure of three sides only; but I cannot in any way imagine the thousand sides of a chiliagon.”

Lockean ideas come in four kinds as a result of two crosscutting distinctions. The first is a distinction between the two sources of ideas. Having mounted arguments against the possibility of innate ideas or principles in Book I of the Essay, Locke introduces the bedrock principle of his empiricist program: that all the materials of reason and knowledge derive from experience, either of external, sensible objects (sensation) or of the operations of our own minds (reflection). Orthogonal to this distinction is the (much debated) distinction between simple and complex ideas. Thus Lockean ideas are all either simple ideas (of sensation or reflection) or complex ideas (of sensation or reflection), and all complex ideas, “however compounded, and decompounded, may at last be resolved into simple Ideas.” But even these Lockean simple ideas, it seems, can be considered imagistically; as it were, early modern analogues of sense data. Locke scholars continue to discuss this point. It is then at least not unfair to suppose that Berkeley likewise read Locke as holding that ideas are images.

Thus far, I have identified a number of the major commitments of (what Berkeley took to be) Locke’s semantic theory: the Priority Thesis, the Significance thesis, and the thesis that ideas are sensory images. In what follows, I hope to show that though he breaks

---

40 Ibid., AT 72

41 Essay. II.i.2.

42 This issue is discussed fully in Brown (2006), especially chapter 6.

43 Essay, II.xxii.9.

44 See, for example, Ott (2004) 4; Bennett (2000) 11-15.
from Locke’s view on language in interesting and important ways, Berkeley nevertheless maintains versions of each of these theses. It is Berkeley revision of Lockean semantics—and not his total abandonment—that will help shed light on the major themes of his system.

1.5: Berkeley’s Short-Lived Lockean Period

On Saturday, November 19, 1707, a 22-year-old George Berkeley—newly minted as a Junior Fellow of Trinity College Dublin the previous June—delivered a short, critical paper entitled Of Infinites to the Dublin Philosophical Society. It was his first philosophical work and in it, Berkeley espoused a resoundingly Lockean view about language. “‘Tis plain to me,” he writes, “we ought use no sign without an idea answering it.” It is equally plain to Berkeley that we have no idea of an infinitely small line—indeed, that an idea of anything as infinite is impossible—and therefore all talk of infinitely small quantities or extensions is, at bottom, meaningless.

This very brief argument is remarkable for two reasons. The first is that Berkeley’s confidence in the legitimacy of the Lockean view is equaled only by the esteem with which he lauds Locke. He writes of the “incomparable Mr. Locke’s treatise,” where Locke handles the “subject of infinity with that judgement & clearness wch is so peculiar to him”. The second remarkable thing about the argument from Of Infinites is that Berkeley would come to publicly reject the Lockean view on which it depends in less than two months. By January 1708 when he delivered his first public sermon, he was expounding the notion that Heaven is “wt the eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither hath it enter’d into the heart of man to conceive,” an unimaginable paradise that, “we narrow-sighted mortals wretchedly point out

45 “Of Infinites,” in Works 4:236.

46 Ibid., 4:235.
to our selves by green meadows, fragrant groves, refreshing shades, crystal streams & wt other pleasant ideas our fancys can glean up."

Exactly what precipitated Berkeley’s abrupt rejection of the strict Lockean view that every word stands for an idea is unclear. It likely had something to do with the reaction *Of Infinites* received from two prominent clergymen who belonged to the Dublin Philosophical Society at the time: Peter Browne, and William King. We can only speculate as to what went on at the meeting, but we know from Berkeley’s notebooks that, around that time, he warned himself “to use utmost Caution not to give the least Handle of offence to the Church or Churchmen.”

David Berman offers a plausible explanation of how the Lockean view of *Of Infinites* would have offended Browne, King, and other “Churchmen.” The strict Lockean view holds that words that do not stand for ideas are meaningless. (Since ideas are, almost by definition, consciously perceived and therefore cognitively accessible, Berman describes this theory as “cognitivist.”) Berkeley argues that there is no such idea attending ‘infinite’, ergo, it is meaningless. But then so too are claims that God is infinite, or that the joys of Heaven are infinite. These implications, according to Berman, would have reminded Browne and King of a dangerous heretical view advanced a few years before by John Toland, and incited a vigorous reaction to the young Berkeley’s paper.

Whatever the particular impetus, Berkeley took his first important step away from

---

47 *Works* 7:12.

48 Browne was Provost of Trinity College. King was (Anglican) Archbishop of Dublin. David Berman offers the most detailed account of what likely happened between Berkeley, Browne and King to explain the abrupt change in Berkeley’s views. See Berman (1994) 11-20.

49 *Works* 1:87.

the strict cognitivist Lockean view of language shortly after delivering *Of Infinites*. This step was to limit his cognitivist account of meaning only to philosophical contexts, thereby exempting religious claims. This division is codified in his notebooks:

> When I say I will reject all Propositions wherein I know not ... fully & adequately & clearly ... This is not to be extended to propositions in the Scripture. I speak of Matters of Reason & Philosophy not Revelation[.]\(^51\)

That Berkeley initially exempted religious discourse from his Lockean (cognitivist) standards is clear. It is a matter of some dispute, however, how complete was Berkeley's move away from cognitivism. Later, we will look at the case for reading Berkeley as a rejecting entirely any ideational theory of semantics. For present purposes, let us continue to follow Berkeley's departure from the basic Lockean view.

### 1.6: Abstract Ideas

There is no zealot like a convert, and there are few things about which converts are more zealous than attacking the views they have given up. In November 1707, Berkeley was a straightforward Lockean about meaning. By the next January, he was no longer. If Berman is right that the principal reason Berkeley moved away from the strict Lockean view was because of its troubling religious implications, then this too was relatively short-lived. By the time Berkeley wrote his *A Treatise concerning The Principles of Human Knowledge*—better known as the *Principles*—the Lockean view was nothing less than the source of all philosophical error.\(^52\)

The title of the *Principles* is, one might think, a kind of practical joke. The principles

---

\(^{51}\) NB 720. See also Berman (1994) 13.

\(^{52}\) The *Principles* was first published in 1710, and it appears that Berkeley had been working on it from about 1708.
that Berkeley concerns himself with are not those that lead to human knowledge, but rather those that stand as obstacles to human knowledge. His purpose, he writes early on in the Introduction, “is to try if I can discover what those principles are, which have introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions into the several sects of philosophy.”53 The reader then promptly discovers that one such principle is “the opinion that the mind hath a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things,” an opinion Berkeley tells us concerns the “nature and abuse of language.”54

What is an abstract idea, and why would someone think there are such things? Abstract ideas, as far as Berkeley understands them, are supposed to be the ideas by which the mind thinks about, primarily, qualities that many different particular things may embody (say, redness) or kinds to which many particular things may belong (say, dogs or cats). Allegedly, abstract ideas are produced by considering the idea of a particular thing (say, a red apple) and then distilling or deleting information contained in that idea so as to produce an idea of only a quality (say, shape) which is not an idea of any particular shape. This “mental separation” is allegedly how we come to such ideas as the idea of ‘man’:

[T]he mind having observed that Peter, James, and John, resemble each other, in certain common agreements of shape and other qualities, leaves out of the complex or compounded idea it has of Peter, James, and any other particular man, that which is peculiar to each, retaining only what is common to all; and so makes an abstract idea wherein all the particulars equally partake, abstracting entirely from and cutting off all those circumstances and differences, which might determine it to any particular existence. And after this manner it is said we come by the abstract idea of man or, if you please, humanity or human nature[.]55

Nonsense, Berkeley argues; no such process of abstracting does exist, and no such idea could

53 PHK Intro §4.
54 Ibid. §6.
55 Ibid. §9.
The ideas of man that I frame to my self, must be either of a white, or a black, or a
tawny, a straight, or a crooked, a tall, or a low, or a middle-sized man. I cannot by
any effort of thought conceive the abstract idea above described.\textsuperscript{56}

There is some question as to what exactly is Berkeley’s objection to the putative abstract idea
of ‘man’. Winkler argues that Berkeley’s principal objection is that the idea represents
something impossible and would require us to have the power to conceive of something that
even God is incapable of creating.\textsuperscript{57} Since nothing can exceed the power of God, there can
be no such power and no such idea. Bennett offers a different and (I think) more compelling
line: the idea \textit{itself} is impossible. Either argument would likely satisfy Berkeley, though the
latter seems to be the stronger. It requires, though, that Berkeley is thinking of ideas
imagistically.

That Berkeley thinks of ideas as images is supported strongly by his response to
response to one of Locke’s most embarrassing gaffes, the “general idea of a triangle,” which
is quoted at length in the Introduction to the \textit{Principles}. According to Locke, “the \textit{general Idea}
of a \textit{Triangle} … must be neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor
Scalenon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot
exist; an \textit{Idea} wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent \textit{Ideas} are put
together.”\textsuperscript{58} But an idea of a triangle that is neither equilateral, equicrural, or scalene is not
obviously impossible or even absurd if by idea one means something like a Cartesian idea of
intellect or even something more like a concept. Yet Berkeley clearly thinks such an idea is
an impossibility and this, along with his mention of the idea “corresponding to a \textit{description},”

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid. §10.

\textsuperscript{57} Winkler (1989) 34.

\textsuperscript{58} Essay IV.vii.9. See also PHK Intro §13
I think show he thought of such ideas as images. For if the general idea of a triangle is supposed to be an *image* of a triangle, and in particular a triangle that is neither equilateral, equicrural, or scalene, then such an image (and idea) is indeed impossible, and the impossibility of forming such an idea in the mind easily demonstrable to anyone who tries. And this is precisely Berkeley’s challenge: “All I desire is, that the reader would fully and certainly inform himself whether he has such an idea or no.”\(^{59}\)

All this only explains what abstract ideas are supposed to be. We will not fully see until Chapter 4 just why Berkeley finds the doctrine of abstraction so pernicious. But why is there a doctrine of abstraction: why would anyone have thought there were such things as abstract ideas in the first place? Berkeley’s answer to this question brings us round again to issues more central to the sympathetic interpretation.

As Berkeley understood him, Locke posited abstract ideas to solve an empirical puzzle: what is it that explains how human being can use language but other animals cannot? Locke’s answer is that the use of language requires the use of general terms. The use of general terms, Locke claims, requires the existence of general—i.e., abstract—ideas.\(^{60}\) Here we see the Priority Thesis and the Significance Thesis in play. More importantly, however, is Locke’s assumption of a kind of isomorphism between the semantics of a word and the content of the idea for which it allegedly stands. According to Locke, “Words become general, by being made the signs of general Ideas; and Ideas become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other Ideas that may determine them to this or that particular Existence.”\(^{61}\) An idea becomes general, that is, by being made

\(^{59}\) PHK Intro §13.

\(^{60}\) *Essay* II.xii.10

\(^{61}\) *Essay* III.iii.6.
abstract—by having some of its content deleted—so as to “[represent] more Individuals than one; each of which, having in it a conformity to that abstract Idea, is (as we call it) of that sort.”\textsuperscript{62} It is because ‘triangle’ stands for an abstract idea of a triangle, which idea bears a resemblance to all triangles and yet is not an idea of any particular triangle, that the word refers to all triangles generally.

Of course, if there can be no such general idea of a triangle, then this story about the meaning of general terms must be wrong. But this mistaken story is motivated by deeper views about language, and it is at these views that Berkeley then takes aim. He identifies two such “received opinions”:

(A) that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas

(B) that every significant name stands for an idea

Berkeley rejects both of these. The impossibility of the relevant kind of abstract ideas is damning evidence against (B) by itself, but he raises additional data against it as well. “May we not,” he writes, “be affected with the promise of a good thing, though we have not an idea of what it is?”

If any one shall join ever so little reflection of his own to what has been said, I believe it will evidently appear to him, that general names are often used in propriety of language without the speaker’s designing them for marks of ideas in his own, which he would have them raise in the mind of the hearer.”\textsuperscript{63}

It is not hard to imagine that Berkeley is here recalling his note to himself that religious language is to be excused from the Lockean demand to produce an idea or be considered meaningless. His “promise of a good thing,” might as well have been a promise of the Heaven he called (just two years before) “wt the eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither hath

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{63} PHK Intro §20.
it enter’d into the heart of man to conceive.”

1.7: THE END(S) OF LANGUAGE

If there are cases where language used in “propriety” without signifying ideas, then something must be wrong with the assumption that language has no other purpose than to communicate ideas.

There are other ends [of language], as the raising of some passion, the exciting to, or deterring from an action, the putting the mind in some particular disposition; to which the former [i.e., communicating ideas] is in many cases barely subservient, and sometimes entirely omitted, when these can be obtained without it, as I think doth not infrequently happen.

Berkeley’s pluralism about the ends of language seems to imply a corresponding pluralism about the criteria for linguistic success including, in particular, pragmatic criteria. This is a major shift from Locke’s view on which success in communication seems to consist in nothing but a kind of correspondence between the thoughts in the mind of the speaker and those in the mind of the hearer. Berkeley himself maintained something similar in his early Lockean period: “Let [the reader] not regard my Words any otherwise than as occasions of bringing into his mind determin’d significations so far as they fail of this they are Gibberish, Jargon & deserve not the name of Language.”

With the Principles, this strict demand that every meaningful utterance must have a clear signification is exploded. Not only is religious language exempted, but now all manner of speech acts can be, in a way, meaningful without producing any particular, determinate

---

64 See Works 7:12 and above fn. 42.
65 PHK Intro §20.
66 See Essay III.ii.1-6.
67 NB A696.
ideas in the mind of the hearer. For these other linguistic practices to be successful then is for the intended result to occur. To be sure, in order to bring about the desired result, it may require that the hearer first bring to mind the ideas typically signified by the words used. So, to raise her team’s passion a coach might remind them of a time when they were badly beaten. “Think back to when we lost to them the last time,” she might say, thereby prompting her players to remember an upsetting defeat. Or she might simply enjoin them to, “Fight like hell!” where her words manage only to provoke an emotional response. For Berkeley, both speech acts are legitimate, both practically useful—both meaningful though only the former is, strictly speaking, significant.

1.8: A PRELIMINARY SUMMARY

By the end of the Introduction to the Principles, Berkeley’s thoughts about language can be roughly summed up as follows. There are many different ends for which language may used. Not all of these uses require the communication of ideas. Words do not always signify the same idea(s) in every instance. Indeed, not all words do or can signify ideas at all (e.g., “Heaven”). Later on in the body of the Principles, Berkeley adds to these anti-Lockean views. He argues that, since our entirely inactive ideas cannot represent an active substance such as spirit, the names of spirits and their operations do not signify ideas either; rather, they signify notions.68

68 Notions are introduced in the second edition of Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous as Berkeley’s technical term for thoughts about ourselves, God, relations, and acts of the mind. One can speculate that Berkeley adverted to (or just plain invented) notions as a way of rescuing his system from the charge that, since ideas are in their own nature entirely passive, that we have “no idea” of God. Berkeley writes, “I own I have properly no idea, either of God or any other spirit; for these being active, cannot be represented by things perfectly inert as our ideas are. I do nevertheless know, that I who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly, as I know my ideas exist. … However, taking the word idea in a large sense, my soul may be said to furnish me with an idea, that is, an image, or likeness of God, though indeed extremely inadequate. For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections.” Dialogues 2:231-2.
Each of these views represents a break in some way from Locke. It might seem, in fact, that there is little left to connect the two. Might Berkeley have rejected entirely any variety of ideational semantics? Before we can get clear on Berkeley’s account of his philosophy of language, we must consider this possibility.

1.9: How Far Does He Go?

According to the naïve Lockean view developed earlier, words derive their meaning by signifying specific ideas in each instance of their use. If the semantic function of two words differ, this must stem from their signifying different ideas. And the sole purpose for language is to communicate such ideas. Taken seriously, Berkeley thinks, this rigid ideational semantic picture necessarily results in the positing of abstract ideas.

Berkeley argues against such abstract ideas on phenomenological and epistemological grounds. If we look for such ideas, we will fail to find any. Moreover, there couldn’t be such ideas anyway, since so many of them would be impossible inconsistent mental images—an image of a triangle that is not an image of any particular triangle. If abstract ideas are out of the question, then something must be wrong with the Lockean view that leads to and relies upon them. We have already identified the way in which Berkeley saw Locke’s semantic theory to lead to abstract ideas, and the ways in which Berkeley rejected the basic Lockean picture. Thus far, though, Berkeley’s criticisms of the Lockean ideational theory do not depend on Berkeley’s holding a competing ideational theory.

It might seem that Berkeley’s attack on Lockean semantics is evidence of his total rejection of any ideational theory of meaning. This interpretation has been proposed recently by John Russell Roberts. According to Roberts, since Berkeley recognizes the ideational theory of meaning as the source of the doctrine of abstraction, it would uncharitable to then
read Berkeley as himself holding a different ideational theory. Instead, we should read Berkeley as an early proponent of a use theory of meaning on which words acquire meaning by the roles they play in practical activities. Grasping the meaning of words, according to Roberts, “is a matter of the mastery of the employment of signs.”

There is something to be said for this proposal. As already mentioned, Berkeley adopts a pluralistic view about the purposes of language, and for some purposes, a pragmatic criteria for success. To “understand”, for example, an appeal to authority is just to be disposed to accept the opinion upon being told to, even if no clear ideas are brought to mind.

[When a Schoolman tells me Aristotle hath said it, all I conceive he means by it, is to dispose me to embrace his opinion with the deference and submission which custom has annexed to that name. And this effect may be so instantly produced in the minds of those who are accustomed to resign their judgment to the authority of that philosopher, as it is impossible any idea either of his person, writings, or reputation should go before.]

And this nascent use-theoretic account of meaning appears again in Berkeley’s most mature thoughts on language in his longest and most well received work, Alciphron, or The Minute Philosopher. A series of seven dialogues written while Berkeley lived in Rhode Island, it catalogues a lively debate between the eponymous Alciphron, a travelling “free-thinker”, and Euphranor, a humble gentleman farmer. In the final dialogue, Alciphron attempts one last time to show that the Christian faith is meaningless, relying on a straightforward Lockean account of semantics.

---

69 Roberts (2007) 64.

70 PHK Intro §20.

71 Published in February 1732. According to Luce and Jessop, the Queen publicly commended it shortly after its release. This is in sharp contrast to Berkeley’s earlier works, especially the Principles which Berkeley’s friend John Percival could manage to convince no one to read. Incidentally, the Queen in question was Caroline of Ansbach (wife of King George II) who was no poseur on the topic of philosophy, having served as the intermediary (and sometimes referee) of the Leibniz-Clarke correspondence.
“Words are signs: they do or should stand for ideas, which so far as they suggest they are significant. But words that suggest no ideas are insignificant. He who annexeth a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense; but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense.”

Alciphron takes particular aim at the Christian concept of grace, which he finds himself “altogether unable to understand … or frame any distinct idea of it.” Berkeley’s mouthpiece Euphranor replies that words are indeed signs, “yet … those signs may be significant, though they should not suggest ideas represented by them, provided they serve to regulate and influence our wills, passions, or conduct.” Even mathematical language is granted by Euphranor to be useful in this practical sense in spite of the inability to produce coherent ideas for which they stand: “for instance, 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 any such quantity.”

Beyond the textual support, this reading allows Roberts to claim that there is just “one Berkeley” on the matter of language. If we attribute to Berkeley a same-for-all-cases account of how language becomes meaningful, then this has the virtue of interpretive simplicity. It would seem then that there are good reasons for reading Berkeley as an early, committed use theorist about meaning.

1.10: “… AT BOTTOM THEY HAVE NO MEANING IN THEM.”

While it is true that Berkeley does not rely on a competing ideational theory in his

---

72 Works 3:287.

73 Ibid. 7:290.

74 Ibid. 7:296-7, emphasis added.

75 Ibid. 7:307.
critique of Locke’s view, this is not enough to show the Berkeley does not rely on a competing version nonetheless. Nor is interpretive simplicity grounds enough for concluding that he does not, unless it can be shown that there are no instances where Berkeley’s arguments turn on a requirement that words signify determinate ideas.

For all that can be said in favor of Roberts’s use-theoretical interpretation of Berkeley, it cannot account for the ubiquitous Berkeleian mantra that the claims of his opponents are ultimately meaningless.76 “Strictly speaking,” Berkeley writes, “to believe that which involves a contradiction, or has no meaning in it, is impossible.” He continues:

In one sense indeed, men may be said to believe that matter exists, that is, they act as if the immediate cause of their sensations, which affects them every moment and is so nearly present to them, were some senseless unthinking being. But that they should clearly apprehend any meaning marked by those words, and form thereof a settled speculative opinion, is what I am not able to conceive. This is not the only instance wherein men impose upon themselves by imagining they believe those propositions they have often heard, though at bottom they have no meaning in them.77

It seems here that Berkeley is precisely distinguishing the pragmatic sense in which one might be said to believe that “matter exists” from the strict, philosophical sense of the claim. “Matter exists” has a use: presumably, people will utter it; they will behave in particular ways in response to utterances of it; very likely, they will be prepared to make other, related utterances. But if this happens, their behavior will be influenced by words “which at bottom have no meaning.” If Berkeley is a thoroughgoing early use-theorist about meaning, there can be no such distinction; a statement that has practical effects cannot be meaningless. Since this is exactly what Berkeley here denies, it cannot be true that he held a full-blown use theory of meaning.

76 See, for example, PHK §§17, 24, 45, 54, 72, 79.

77 PHK §54.
Here then is something of a puzzle. As we have seen, Berkeley apparently does acknowledge purely pragmatic speech acts that can be meaningful even when they do not (and cannot) signify clear ideas. And yet, in some cases, he clearly denies that certain claims are meaningful, in spite of the fact that they have practical consequences. Berkeley appears to be playing both sides of the debate.

There is, however, a coherent way to reconcile this apparent tension. The key is Berkeley’s view about the development of language and his pluralism about the ends to which it can be put. Contrary to Locke’s view that language developed so that “the Thoughts of Men’s Minds be conveyed from one to another,” Berkeley has a more organic conception. Language was, “framed by the vulgar, merely for conveniency and dispatch in the common actions of life, without any regard to speculation.”\(^7\) As he claims in *Alciphron*, “the true end of speech … in all its degrees, is not merely, or principally, or always, the imparting or acquiring of ideas, but rather something of an active operative nature, tending to a conceived good.”\(^9\)

Because language developed for practical and not theoretical purposes, a significant amount of looseness of speech could be accommodated without significant costs. This loose speech is still exhibited by the Vulgar (Berkeley’s name for the uneducated, the “illiterate bulk of mankind”).\(^8\) Writes Berkeley, “words as Used by the Vulgar are taken in some Latitude, their signification is confused.”\(^8\) And so, natural language is “suited to the received

\(^7\) See also 3D 2:182, *Works* 2:282, NTV §120, and PHK §52.


\(^8\) See PHK Intro §1.

\(^8\) Berkeley, *Notebooks*, A §544.
opinions, which are not always the truest.”

In virtue of its practical heritage, natural language is an inefficient tool for strict and speculative inquiry, that is, for philosophy, which Berkeley describes as “nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth.” And it is in this linguistic application where Berkeley’s Lockean lineage exerts its influence, for while it is important to note Berkeley’s innovation in recognizing purely pragmatic speech acts, it is equally important to see that he retains, as one legitimate end of language, the mere “communication of ideas.”

When language is put to the end of speculative philosophy—simply for communicating ideas—the end can only be achieved if the hearer, as it were, “gets the message”; i.e., if the hearer comes to think of clear, determinate ideas. This requires that the speaker herself uses words that, as much as possible, suggest such clear, determinate ideas. This in turn requires that the speaker has clear, determinate ideas in mind—that she has first clearly thought what she intends to relay by means of words. It is true, in most cases, that it is not necessary that the hearer to bring these ideas to mind at every instance of a word. Like counters in a card game, it is enough to manipulate the words themselves without referring to the ideas at every moment. But like counters, words must have cash value, at the end of the discussion, words to which the hearer can connect no clear ideas are no better than counters for which the card player can receive no money—they are worthless, counterfeit—“they have at bottom no meaning.”

1.11: THE HYBRID IDEATIONAL THEORY

This is a kind of ideational theory of meaning, but it is not wholly an ideational

---

82 PHK §52.

83 PHK Intro §1.
theory of meaning. It is, rather, a *hybrid ideational theory*, according to which different linguistic practices employ different standards for meaning. Where “truth and strictness of speech” are of paramount concern, Berkeley retains the demand that language be offered only as signs of coherent thoughts. It is not true then that Berkeley rejects entirely the Lockean picture that words are meaningful in virtue of the ideas they stand as signs for. As we have seen though, Berkeley does break from the basic Lockean view in other fundamental ways. These uniquely Berkeleian modifications will be crucially important in what follows. Here then is a summary of the hybrid ideational theory with the relevant qualifications:

(HIT) When language is used to communicate ideas—which is not always—, words are meaningful just in case they can signify coherent ideas; however …

1. A word need not signify an idea each time it is used.
2. The same word need not signify the same idea each time it signifies.
3. The ideas signified must be determinate in content; they may not be abstract.

The hybrid ideational theory is, perhaps, an inelegant view to attribute to Berkeley. Counting heavily in its favor, though, is the fact that scholars have consistently read Berkeley as a proponent of an ideational theory of meaning, with Roberts being the lone exception, and it is strongly supported by Berkeley’s texts. Yet the best support that can be provided for attributing the hybrid ideational theory to Berkeley is the power the interpretation has to solve (or dissolve) problems scholars have had in interpreting Berkeley; as it were, the proof of the attribution is in the power of the interpretation. This is the ultimate aim of this dissertation. In what follows, I will apply this account of Berkeley’s philosophy of language

---

84 Notable examples of scholars who also attribute an ideational theory of meaning to Berkeley are Bennett (1971), Pitcher (1977), and Winkler (1989).
to a trio of interpretive puzzles; the immediate perception of sensible objects, the so-called problem of continuity, and Berkeley’s alleged defense of commonsense. Each of these areas of Berkeley’s thought has received considerable attention. Regarding each, scholars can be roughly divided into two interpretive camps which, I think, each fall short in important ways. I will argue that the shortcomings of these interpretations can be traced to a failure to hew strictly to Berkeley’s thoughts about language. I will then try to show how a strict interpretation can ameliorate the apparent problems these other interpretations face without incurring additional ones.
CHAPTER 2: BERKELEY'S RADICAL NOMINALISM

“Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind,” Berkeley writes, “that a man need only open his eyes to see them.”*85 What did Berkeley think was so clear and obvious? That a thinking mind knows it exists as it is thinking? That God exists? Either one of these claims would have been accepted by a large number of Berkeley’s contemporaries, and accepted as obvious by almost as many of them. But Berkeley’s claim wasn’t about either of these. What he claims is so near and obvious to the mind is that “all the choir of heaven and furniture of earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known.”*86 This is Berkeley’s Idealism, the view that everything is either a perceiver or perceived, and the latter has no existence independent of the former; the esse of the sensible world is percipij.87

Not only is Idealism obviously true to Berkeley, but its main metaphysical rival, materialism, is obviously dangerous. Just why Berkeley is so worried about materialism will concern us in Chapter 4. For present purposes, we need to better understand what Berkeley’s Idealism is, and in particular, what it has to say about the nature of that part of our world that is perceived and not perceiver. I hope to show that Berkeley is not guilty of overwrought rhetoric in claiming that his Idealism is near and obvious to the mind,

---

85 PHK §6.
86 Ibid.
87 The phrase “esse is percipij” is Berkeley’s own, first appearing in PHK §3.
at least according to his own principles. The key to this will be an application and expansion of the hybrid ideational theory of language developed in the previous chapter.

2.1: A Matter of Matter, In Brief

Berkeley’s claim that the mind-dependence of the physical world is obvious to anyone who cares to examine the matter is, at the very least, worthy of a raised eyebrow. He does, after all, note that “the contrary opinion”—that the things we perceive “have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived”—is one “strangely [i.e., very much] prevailing amongst men.” The most pernicious version of this popular but mistaken view maintains that sensible objects are material objects. Here, it would be difficult and unnecessary to go into great detail. Berkeley entertains a host of different versions of materialism and rejects all of them. As a quick gloss, the versions of materialism Berkeley considers share a common structural core: sensible objects are, at the ultimate metaphysical level, material substances which interact with our minds to produce in us our sensory experiences, i.e., our sensory ideas. What is central to each version of materialism—and to Berkeley’s objections to each—is that according to materialism, the objects themselves are, strictly speaking, unperceivable. All that is perceived (and here we are shifting to the epistemological consequences attending the metaphysical view) are our own ideas, which are somehow caused by, or resemblances of, or otherwise necessarily connected to the interaction of our perceptual systems with matter. But as Berkeley understood it, matter itself is unsensed—indeed, insensible; a something-we-know-not-what.

Because we never perceive matter itself, we can have no ideas of it. This is Berkeley’s principal argument against it. Any putative idea “idea of matter” would be either (a) impermissibly abstract, or (b) some idea of a sensible quality (e.g., an idea of heat, color, shape, extension, etc.). But matter is alleged to be something distinct from any sensible quality; it is supposed to be that which supports and unites such qualities. A particular sensible object then is a particular material substance in which certain qualities (or powers to produce ideas) inhere.

2.2: HOUSES, MOUNTAINS, AND RIVERS

The specifics of Berkeley’s rejection of any materialist account of sensible objects are largely beyond my purposes here. More to the point is Berkeley’s own immaterialist Idealist account of sensible objects. Berkeley says clearly and often that sensible objects are not material substances but rather collections of ideas. 89 “It is evident,” he writes, “that [the objects of human knowledge] are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by help of memory and imagination.” 90

And as several of these [ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple. 91

89 The large preponderance of Berkeley scholars agree that this is his official view. I can think of only two who explicitly reject this line. Winkler argues for a phenomenalist interpretation on which it is more accurate to say that, “objects supervene on ideas, instead of standing in the relation of identity to distinct collections of them.” See Winkler (1989) 198-9. In a very different vein, Marc Hight argues that, “the tables and chairs that we perceive are considered by us to be single ideas that signify collections of sensory ideas.” See Hight (2007) 105.

90 PHK §1.

91 Ibid.
These ideas, he maintains, cannot exist without the mind. He even claims this is “what everybody will allow.” So, very early on in the *Principles*, Berkeley is prepared to assert of “houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects,” that they are merely “the things we perceive by sense,” and that we perceive nothing “besides our own ideas or sensations.”

This brief sketch of an Idealist account of sensible objects raises a number of issues, however. Sensible objects are collections of ideas—but collections of which ideas? Whose ideas? How do these ideas get collected? And who does the collecting? These are difficult questions to answer; Berkeley’s positive account of sensible objects is woefully underdeveloped. As we will see, there are two popular ways of interpreting Berkeley on these issues. Both ways, I think, fall short as interpretations of Berkeley’s texts and fail to respect his philosophical commitments. By far the more popular interpretation, versions of which I call variants of the “collection theory,” answer the above questions in a similar way. Sensible objects are collections of innumerably many sensible ideas perceived by innumerably many minds—your ideas, my ideas, God’s ideas, my cats’ ideas, etc.—all of which are somehow linked together by God’s activity or perception (depending on the interpretation) and which we learn to associate with one another.

This type of response, while it provides answers to the questions about the membership of the collections and their coming to be collected, is surprisingly ill suited as an interpretation of Berkeley. For while he affirms that sensible objects are collections of ideas,

---

92 PHK §3. It was commonplace for Berkeley’s contemporaries to

93 PHK §4.
Berkeley also says very often that we immediately perceive sensible objects. Among collection theorists, there is genuine disagreement over whether this is his preferred view. George Pappas and Michael Ayers, for example, want to read Berkeley’s statements about immediate perception as literally true. Margaret Atherton and George Pitcher, on the other hand, hold that on Berkeley’s considered view, our perception of sensible objects involves too much of a contribution from the mind to count as immediate perception and instead counts as mediate perception, or more accurately, perception by suggestion. Let us call this issue—whether sensible objects are perceived immediately or mediate—the Puzzle of Immediacy.

2.3: The Puzzle of Immediacy

Much of the debate over the Puzzle of Immediacy concerns what exactly Berkeley means by ‘perceive’ when applied to sensible objects and, somewhat less so, about what it means to perceive something immediately. So it seems to be agreed on both sides that to perceive an idea immediately is to perceive it without the aid of an intermediate idea—that is, without the idea being suggested to the mind by some other idea—and without any kind of inference. And it seems agreed on both sides that some perception—in particular, perception of some members of collections—is immediate. What is in dispute, then, is whether the immediate perception of some members of a collection of ideas (that is, a

---

94 The list is extensive. See, for example, NB 427a; TVV §§9, 11; PHK §38, 95; Dialogues pp. 174-5, 180, 183, 194, 203, 209, 215, 230, 262.

95 Both Pappas and Atherton seem to understand immediacy in this way. Moreover, they share a similar view about the membership of collections. Yet they differ on the question of whether collections are immediately perceived. See, for example, Pappas (2000, 11) and Atherton (2008, 110-1). I will discuss the mediate/immediate perception distinction more fully shortly.

96 See, for example, Atherton (2008, 108) and Pappas (2000, 191).
sensible object) is sufficient for the immediate perception of the collection (object) itself, since it is universally accepted that such collections contain as members more ideas than those which are immediately perceived at a given time, by a given mind.

Pappas thinks immediate perception of some sufficient number of members of a collection is sufficient for immediate perception of the collection itself; or rather, that immediate perception of some members is enough to count as immediate perception of the collection.\(^{97}\) For Pappas, “if S immediately perceives a cluster of ideas O, and the ideas in the cluster are constituents of the physical object R, then S will also immediately perceive R.”\(^{98}\) So, even though right now I am only immediately perceiving the front of my computer monitor, since the ideas I perceive immediately are constituents of the entire collection that is the computer monitor, I am thereby immediately perceiving the monitor itself.

Atherton, however, has given good reasons to think that nothing is immediately perceived beyond what Berkeley calls the “proper objects” of perception. Proper perception is invoked by Berkeley primarily in his works on vision in order to distinguish the ways in which we can be said to see, for example, colors and distance. “The proper immediate objects of vision,” Berkeley writes, “is light, in all its modes and variations, various colours in kind, in degree, in quantity.”\(^{99}\) A man born blind and made to see as an adult—one of Berkeley’s favorite tropes—would perceive these colors immediately but would not perceive them as being at a distance or as being signs of tangible objects at a distance; “he would neither perceive nor imagine any resemblance or connexion between these visible objects


\(^{98}\) Ibid., p. 12.

\(^{99}\) TVV §44, 1:266.
and those perceived by feeling.”¹⁰⁰ These connections he would only learn later through repeated experience. The proper objects of perception then are those that would still have been perceived by some sense had that sense been “first conferred on us.”¹⁰¹ But since we only learn through experience that the proper objects of perception are reliably connected with other sensible ideas—that is, since we only learn through experience that the ideas immediately perceived are constituents in larger collections of ideas—we do not immediately perceive physical objects.¹⁰²

It is hard to be satisfied with either interpretation. Atherton’s account, though subtle and almost certainly correct about the objects of immediate perception being the proper objects of perception, runs directly afoul of too many texts where Berkeley asserts unambiguously that sensible objects are immediately perceived. Pappas’s account is superior on that point, but only by an ad hoc extension of immediate perception according to which immediate perception of some members of a collection counts as immediate perception of the collection. Unfortunately for Pappas, Berkeley nowhere says that one’s immediate perception of some members of a collection is sufficient to count as immediate perception of the whole collection (most of whose members one does not perceive immediately, if at all).

Unlike Atherton and Pappas, however, I think the solution to this puzzle is not to be found by looking into what Berkeley means by ‘perceive’ when applied to sensible objects, but by looking more closely at what Berkeley means by ‘sensible objects.’ As Jonathan Bennett notes, if we go by an ordinary understanding of ‘perceive’ and ‘collection’, we’re led

---

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. See also NTV §§110 and 128 and DHP 204.

¹⁰¹ Atherton (2008, p. 113). See DHP 204.

¹⁰² Atherton (2008, p. 114-5). The term “physical object” is Atherton’s, which I gather she intends to be synonymous with Berkeley’s “sensible object”.
to the answer that to perceive a collection is to perceive every member of it; likewise, to immediately perceive a collection of ideas is to immediately perceive every member of it. Of course, neither Bennett nor Pappas nor Atherton is prepared to accept that as Berkeley’s view. Both Atherton and Pappas agree, “even the most dedicated realist does not suppose that we are perceiving absolutely all of a physical object whenever we look at it.”

I want to argue, however, that Berkeley is just such an über-dedicated realist about sensible objects, at least when we properly understand what he means by ‘sensible objects’. We should not take Berkeley’s claims about immediate perception as a hurdle over which an account of Berkeleyan sensible objects must pass, but as a guide to what Berkeley thinks “sensible objects” are in the first place.

What I propose and defend in the remainder of this chapter is an alternative view neglected by both Atherton and Pappas: that sensible objects are both collections of ideas and immediately perceived in the strict sense. That is, the collections of ideas that are sensible objects are collections of just those immediately perceived ideas—those ideas, in particular, that are signified by particular sensible object name-tokens.

2.4: A SIMPLE CASE OF MODUS PONENS

I have already mentioned that Berkeley frequently asserts that we immediately perceive sensible objects. Here are the best examples of his doing so:

“By a sensible object I understand that which is properly perceived by sense. Things properly perceived by sense are immediately perceived.”

“The objects of sense, being things immediately perceived, are otherwise called ideas.”

103 Bennett (2001, p. 172)
PHILONOUS: “[S]ensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense. … [Sensible things] are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combinations of sensible qualities.”

PHILONOUS: “Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; …”

Atherton claims that Berkeley’s texts are ambiguous on the question of whether we immediately perceive sensible objects such that “no single ‘smoking gun’ quotation can settle the matter.” One smoking gun text may not settle the matter, but I think this small arsenal of them does. Berkeley does think sensible objects are immediately perceived. What then does it mean to perceive something immediately?

On this, Berkeley is more liable to cite examples than to provide a definition. Only sounds are immediately perceived by hearing. Only light and colors are immediately perceived by sight. What Berkeley calls “tangible qualities” are the immediate objects of the tactile sense. To the extent that Berkeley offers a definition, it is cast in largely negative terms. We are told that non-immediate perception—hereafter mediate perception—“must be by the means of some other idea,” but the notion of immediate perception is left undefined. Here too Berkeley prefers an example:

“[F]or instance, the passions which are in the mind of another are of themselves to me invisible. I may nevertheless perceive them by sight, though not immediately, yet by means of the colours they produce in the countenance. We often see the shame

---

104 Respectively, TVV §9, §11; 3D 175, 209.

105 Atherton (2008a) 108.

106 I will follow Atherton’s (2008a) treatment closely here since I think she characterizes immediate perception exactly right, but combines this with the wrong account of sensible objects and concludes that Berkeley denies sensible objects are immediately perceived.

107 TVV §9.

108 NTV §128.

109 3D 2:175. See also NTV §45.

110 NTV §9.
or fear in the looks of a man, by perceiving the changes of his countenance to red or pale.” 111

So I may say I “see” the shame or fear another person feels even though, being an emotion “to me invisible,” the shame or fear itself is not perceived by sight. Rather, it is suggested to the mind by visually perceived cues. 112 Unlike the visual perception of colors and light, however, this perception (of the emotion) by suggestion has to be learned through experience. According to Berkeley, there is no necessary connection between the color and the emotion (or between the sensation of one’s eyes turning and focusing and the idea of distance that these sensations suggest). Rather, because red face-perceptions are observed to regularly accompany thoughts about angry emotions, “there has grown an habitual or customary connexion between those two sorts of ideas, so that the mind no sooner perceives [the one]… but it withal perceives [the other] which was wont to be connected with that sensation: just as upon hearing a certain sound, the idea is immediately suggested to the understanding which custom had united with it.” 113 Given these texts, a first approximation at a definition of immediate perception is this:

Immediate perception is perception of an idea(s) that occurs without an intermediary.

Seeing color, hearing sound, and feeling warmth are all examples of immediate perception since, paradigmatically, our seeing (or hearing, or feeling) is not necessarily preceded or attended by another perception. This is to be distinguished from mediate perception; cases

111 Ibid.

112 This leaves open the question of exactly what is thereby suggested. One possibility is that Berkeley holds a sort of proto-Humean account of sympathy on which the perception of another person’s red face triggers the production of the emotions of anger or fear in the perceiver. Another reading is that the perception of another person’s red face suggests to the mind an imagination of the red-faced person, say, shouting or otherwise behaving angrily. My own sense is that the latter is the more plausible Berkeleian view, but Berkeley’s texts are disappointingly mute on the matter.

113 NTV §17. I take this to be more evidence that Berkeley holds the hybrid ideational theory.
in which, by the immediate perception of, say, the blush of color on someone’s face, another idea—say, an emotion—is suggested to the mind. In such a case, we say we see the anger or shame, but strictly speaking, all we see is the color of the visage.

What in our experience would count as immediately perceived, and what not? Here again Atherton is very helpful for she points us to what she calls the “first conferred” criterion. Ideas that are immediately perceived by a given sense are those only that “would have been perceived, in case that same sense had then been first conferred on us.”

Although the “first conferred” criterion appears only once and in the Dialogues, perhaps the best way of seeing it at work in Berkeley’s philosophy is to look back at the New Theory of Vision. There, Berkeley introduces the thought experiment of the man born blind and made to see as an adult. It is crucial to Berkeley’s account of vision that the man born blind would not, at first sight, “see” anything at a distance. Nor would he “see” which of two objects was a cube and which a sphere, despite knowing how to distinguish them by touch.

It is not that the man born blind would not perceive the same visual ideas that any normally sighted person in his position would. In a perfectly natural sense, the man born blind and made to see as an adult sees exactly what we all see. Rather, what he lacks is the ability to appropriately associate the new visual ideas he perceives with the tactile ideas he is already familiar with. In Berkeley’s parlance, he has yet to learn that his visual ideas are signs of tactile ideas—he does not understand the “tangible meaning” of his visual ideas. So, as familiar as he is with the words “sphere” and “cube”, and with the tactile ideas that he uses

---

114 3D 2:204. See also Atherton (2008a) 113.
115 NTV §41.
116 This is Berkeley’s (and Locke’s) answer to the famous Molyneux problem, likely the inspiration for the trope of the man born blind.
117 See Atherton (2008a) 114.
these words to describe, he as yet does not know how these words apply to visual phenomena. Thus, Berkeley:

[...] man blind from his birth would not, at first sight, denominate any thing he saw by the names he had been used to appropriate to ideas of touch[.] Cube, sphere, table are words he has known applied to things perceivable by touch, but to things perfectly intangible he never knew them applied.\footnote{NTV §135.}

It is in this sense—insofar as he is unable to apply the words “sphere” and “cube” to his visual ideas or connect together his visual ideas with their tactile meanings—that the man born blind and made to see still fails to “see” the sphere or the cube.

To the man born blind and made to see, the visible world is at first a blooming, buzzing confusion. But it is no less blooming or buzzing for us, it is merely less confusing. The man born blind and made to see is confronted with all the same visual ideas that normally sighted people perceive. This passes the “first conferred” criteria, so such ideas are the proper objects of sight and are immediately perceived. Occurrently perceived visual ideas are immediately perceived. The ideas that these visual ideas stand as signs for—a tactile cube or sphere, say—are then only mediately perceived by sight.

Up to this point, Atherton and I are (I think) in complete agreement. We agree on what it means for ideas to be perceived immediately. We agree that in any case of perceiving a sensible object, some of the members of the collection of ideas that is the object are perceived immediately. And we both agree (I think) that the man born blind and made to see does indeed perceive immediately some visual ideas that other people would perceive as members of sphere- or cube-collections—that is, ideas that other people would call by the names “sphere” or “cube”—, but that he fails to apprehend their tactile associations and remains ignorant, at first sight, of how to apply the names “sphere” or “cube” to what he sees.
Where we part company is on the membership of the collections that make up sensible objects.

I want to take Berkeley at his word and use what he says about immediate perception to better understand what his account of sensible objects is. If we take at face value Berkeley’s claims that sensible objects—which are nothing but collections of ideas—are immediately perceived, and if we accept that only the proper objects of sense—colors and light, in the case of vision—are immediately perceived, then we have a strong prima facie case that the collections of ideas that Berkeley calls sensible objects do not contain any ideas that are not immediately perceived, regardless of what other ideas these may suggest to the mind. If we take what Berkeley says on these two matters seriously, then it follows rather simply that sensible objects are perceived immediately, though it does require that we understand the collections of ideas that Berkeley calls “sensible objects” in a dramatically different way than scholars have done so traditionally.

But Atherton sees *modus tollens* in what looks (to me) to be a simple case of *modus ponens*, for she concludes that if we accept her view of immediate perception, “the conclusion is unavoidable that physical objects are not immediately perceived because we cannot perceive physical objects when our senses are first conferred upon us.” As I’ve already mentioned, *in a sense* she is right: the man born blind and made to see cannot, at first sight, “see” the sphere or the cube. But it is unclear whether this sense in which we cannot perceive sensible objects when our sense are first conferred on us is a sense that threatens Berkeley’s claims that we nevertheless perceive objects immediately. I will argue that it is not.

Here is the premise that motivates Atherton’s *modus tollens*:

The ideas that belong in the collection that constitute wood, fire, water, etc. are the ones that we reliably come to expect will be present, when we have been presented with an initial subset of these ideas. It is this set of reliable expectations that
constitutes the meaning suggested by immediate perceptions and that results in our calling these collections by one name.\textsuperscript{119}

If it is true that the collections of ideas that Berkeley calls sensible objects include ideas other than those immediately perceived, then I think Atherton is right that we cannot be said to perceive objects immediately. I will even concede the point for the purposes of this paper: if the collections of ideas that Berkeley calls sensible objects include ideas that are not immediately perceived, then it is false that that object is perceived immediately, and therefore false that “sensible objects are all immediately perceivable.” But why should we think this is true? It is not because Berkeley anywhere clearly says as much.

As already noted, Berkeley says disappointingly little about the collections of ideas he identifies with sensible objects. It is as a result of this, I think, that nearly every scholar has succumbed to the temptation to infer an account of these collections from what they already somehow “know” about the “nature” of “sensible objects.” So, for example, suppose Alice and Betty are standing in the Louvre in Paris, admiring the Venus de Milo. Since it’s just commonsense that Alice and Betty are seeing the very same sculpture, and that the sculpture is (in Berkeleian terms) just a collection of ideas, we should conclude that Alice and Betty each perceive the very same collection of ideas; i.e., the collection includes ideas perceived by both Alice and Betty.\textsuperscript{120} By parity of reasoning, we can make similar inferences about the diachronic re-identification of collections, their membership, and of course, their continuity. The result would be the standard collection theory, as described above by Atherton. Here also is how Pitcher sums up such a view: “Berkeley presumably holds that the collection of ideas that constitutes a so-called physical object (an apple, say) includes not only appropriate

\textsuperscript{119} Atherton (2008a) 114.

\textsuperscript{120} Even this approach leaves open the question of whether the collection includes ideas perceived \textit{privately} by each of Alice and Betty, or whether they both perceive \textit{in common} some members of the collection.
ideas of sense that exist, or may exist, in one’s own mind, but also ideas of sense that exist, or may exist, in other people’s (or animals’) minds.”¹²¹ No explicit argument is given for the claim that the collection of ideas that is the apple includes ideas perceived by various minds at various times (as well as ideas that only might be perceived). But it doesn’t seem unfair to read Pitcher’s “presumably” as shorthand for the kind of reasoning I am describing here.¹²²

It is a mistake, however, to assume that Berkeley shared our way of thinking about these things. For one, what we—21st century philosophers—might think about sensible objects is no sure guide to what Berkeley himself may have thought on the matter. More importantly, however, if we read Berkeley as proceeding from the familiar (“sensible objects”) to the relatively obscure (collections), he leaves his audience knowing nothing more about the nature of sensible objects than they started out with. But Berkeley is trying to teach his audience something that they do not already know. And the principal lesson he hopes his audience will learn about sensible objects is that they are not what his materialist contemporaries claim they are. Sensible objects are not the perceptually independent, materially substantial things of academic philosophers. They are mind-dependent; their esse is percep; they are immediately perceived, not the unperceived causes of our perceptions; they are, in fact, words in a divine language. As Berkeley writes, he is, “not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception … I take to be the real things themselves.”¹²³ So, between “facts” about sensible objects given in ordinary language and what his theory of ideas reveals about the nature of our experience,

---

¹²¹ Pitcher (1986, 102).

¹²² And at any rate, it is not hard to suppose this type of reasoning is at work in the background of numerous interpretations.

¹²³ 3D, 2: 244.
Berkeley takes the latter to be prior, leaving the former to be interpreted within the constraints of the theory. The task for us, then, is not to learn how this thing as I normally think of it is perceived immediately, but to learn how to think of this thing given what Berkeley tells us about immediate perception.

2.5: Sensible Objects as ‘Sensible Objects’

For Berkeley, ‘sensible object’ is a term of art. What kind of thing does Berkeley mean to pick out with it? Here is a quick summary of claims Berkeley makes about them. ‘Sensible objects’ are collections of ideas.\textsuperscript{124} They are immediately perceived.\textsuperscript{125} Their constituent members—ideas of the different sense modalities—are of “entirely distinct and heterogeneous” kinds, meaning that there are neither causal relations between them, nor any necessary epistemological relations.\textsuperscript{126} The connections between, say, a given visual idea and a tactile idea are fundamentally arbitrary.\textsuperscript{127} As a result of this, the collections themselves are (to some degree) the product of the mind’s activity, which products we can suppose to differ from mind to mind owing to different learned associations.\textsuperscript{128} These heterogeneous ideas, which we have learned to associate with each other, are then collectively marked by one name and thereby “reputed” or “accounted” one unified thing. Thus Berkeley:

[A]s several of these [ideas of sense] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a

\textsuperscript{124} PHK §1.

\textsuperscript{125} See, for example, NB 427a; TVV §§9, 11; PHK §38, 95; Dialogues pp. 174-5, 180, 183, 194, 203, 209, 215, 230, 262.

\textsuperscript{126} See PHK 44 and throughout NTV and TVV.

\textsuperscript{127} NTV §§39-40, 43.

\textsuperscript{128} See especially NTV 110-111.
certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go
together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name ‘apple’.

[A] cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas
perceived by various senses: which are united into one thing (or have one name given them)
by the mind; because they are observed to attend each other.129

What these and other passages make clear is that the collections of ideas that are called
sensible objects are collections of fundamentally distinct ideas that are collected together and
attributed a kind of unity by the perceiving mind. Just as importantly, this attribution of unity
is deeply tied to the use of sensible object names. How this is so will become clearer shortly.

This last point about names, though, should seem odd already to anyone who is prone to
think of Berkeleian sensible objects in “commonsense” terms.130 Surely what a sensible
object is is prior to what we call it! And yet it seems to be Berkeley’s position that these
collections are what they are in virtue of the names given to them.

[A]s several of these [ideas of sense] are observed to accompany each other, they
come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a
certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go
together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name ‘apple’.

[A] cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas
perceived by various senses: which are united into one thing (or have one name given them)
by the mind; because they are observed to attend each other.131

I think it is natural to read both passages as asserting that the act of naming just is the
collection’s being “reputed as” or “united into” one thing. This is the first sense in which
Berkeley’s account of sensible objects is nominalist.

129 Respectively, PHK 1 2:41, JD 2:249; my emphasis in each.

130 Here I mean commonsense by contemporary standards, where the conception called to mind by the term
“sensible object” is a conception of a hunk of matter, composed of millions of tiny atoms, all of which exists
independently of our perceptions. However, I think it is very tempting and common for scholars to import
some of this contemporary commonsense notion of sensible objects backwards onto Berkeley. More on this in
Chapter 4.

131 Respectively, PHK 1 2:41, JD 2:249; emphasis added in each.
The proponent of the collections account might attempt to take this claim on board without trouble. Surely, even if the attribution of a name somehow makes the collection into a unit, this still means that the collections must contain more than just those immediately perceived ideas! If ‘Venus de Milo’ names a collection of ideas, it names only one such collection! There is, after all, only one Venus de Milo.

But just as it is a mistake to presume Berkeleian ‘sensible objects’ are like what we might think physical objects are, it would be a mistake to presume that Berkeleian names work like we might think names do. In particular, when Berkeley writes that sensible objects are “marked by one name,” it would be a mistake to presume that he means one name-type—‘Venus de Milo’—such that every time an instance of the name is used, it names the same one thing. For Berkeley, there is no one name ‘Venus de Milo’, in this sense, and so no one collection which each use of ‘Venus de Milo’ names. This is the sense in which Berkeley’s nominalism is radical.

Names and other words, Berkeley says, are modifications of light or sound, arbitrarily appointed by humans to be signs of “their several meanings.” Here, it would be easy to think that the semantic unit of Berkeley’s concern is the word-type and that the infinitely various word-types each have “their several meanings.” But this cannot be what Berkeley means, for three reasons. First, we can make no sense of the claim that words are modifications of light or sound if we take Berkeley to mean word-types here. The word-type ‘table’ is not a modification of light or sound—only particular tokens of the word-type are uttered (a modification of sound) or inscribed (a modification of light).

Even if we were to accept that Berkeley means, “word(-types) are (types of) modifications of light or sound,” Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism gives us a deeper reason to

---

132 TVV 40, 1:265. See also Winkler (2005, 128).
read him as being concerned with word-tokens, not word-types. There is nothing in the least bit problematic about work-tokens. Indeed, as modifications of light or sound, they are themselves just unusual sensible objects. A word-type, however, could only be an abstraction in Berkeley’s system.\footnote{Berkeley is self-consciously aware of this subtle point, for he notes that names of sensible objects are used as names of themselves. “It is customary,” Berkeley writes at NTV §140, “to call written words, and the things they signify, by the same name: For words not being regarded in their own nature, or otherwise than as they are marks of things, it had been superfluous, and beside the design of language, to have given them names distinct from those of the things marked by them.”} The closest one might come to something like a word-type, for Berkeley, would be a word-token with what we might call general signification. I might say, for example, “the word ‘table’ can be used to denote flat-surfaced pieces of furniture or sets of data.” In Berkeleian terms, this particular token of ‘table’ is meant to signify a number of ideas; furniture-table ideas as well as data-table ideas. If upon hearing or reading the sample sentence, the hearer or reader is brought to think of both furniture-tables and data-tables in association with the token ‘table’, then all is more or less fine from a semantic standpoint. Note, however, that this story requires nothing more than particular word-tokens and token ideas. We do not need to take on board either word- or idea-types.

Finally, Berkeley’s own illustration, intended to help us understand how “words become general,” is an illustration of how a particular concrete example of dividing a line equally can be employed to cover similar but distinct (particular) cases. The geometer draws a line of a certain length, “which in itself is a particular line is nevertheless with regard to its signification general.”\footnote{PHK Intro 12, emphasis added.} It is because this particular line can suggest to the mind an indefinite number of other particular lines that the demonstration becomes general. Likewise, what we might describe as a putatively “general” word is, for Berkeley a particular word-token that is, “made
to represent or stand for other particular ideas.”¹³⁵ By way of this general signification, “things, names, or notions, being in their own nature particular, are rendered universal.”¹³⁶ Again, it is clear that Berkeley is talking about work-tokens here; only a word-token, inscribed or spoken, can be “in its own nature particular” and yet made general by signifying any number of other particular ideas. Generality of the sort that one might advert to word-types to explain is, for Berkeley, cashed out in terms of token-token(s) signification.

This general signification needs to be clarified. At first glance, one might take Berkeley here to mean that a word or a sign with general signification actually signifies generally—that is, actually stands for an indefinite number of particular ideas—as it is used; that a word with general signification signifies, somehow, a recall set of associated ideas. But this can’t be, since it would be psychologically impossible for the mind to actually consider the indefinite number of particular ideas that might be suggested by a word, nor is a recall set anything more than another kind of abstraction. Rather, we must understand this general signification as follows: though a word might signify any of an indefinite number of ideas, a particular word with general signification in fact only signifies some one particular idea of this larger class.

If this is right, it points us to a radical new understanding of what Berkeley means when he says that sensible objects are united into one thing by the attribution of a name, for it suggests that the collections of ideas that are called sensible objects are just those ideas that are signified by sensible object name-tokens. Let us see how this suggestion can be employed in a particular case.

¹³⁵ PHK Intro 12, 2:32.
¹³⁶ PHK Intro 15, 2:34.
2.6: Radical Nominalism in Action

One of the most difficult passages that concerns the perception of sensible objects, and one that is used to support the view that Berkeleian sensible objects are not immediately perceived, is the famous coach passage from the *New Theory of Vision*. Here it is:

Sitting in my study I hear a coach drive along the street; I look through the casement and see it; I walk out and enter into it; thus, common speech would incline one to think I heard, saw, and touched the same thing, to wit, the coach. It is nevertheless certain, the ideas intromitted by each sense are widely different and distinct from each other; but having been observed constantly to go together, they are spoken of as one and the same thing.  

At first glance, it appears that Berkeley is telling us that the coach is a collection of ideas perceived at different times by sight, touch and hearing. But the point of the passage seems clearly to be that, despite what “common speech” might incline us to think, we *certainly do not* perceive one thing—i.e., one collection—by sight, hearing, and touch. So much so that, “if we take a close and accurate view of things, it must be acknowledged that we never see and feel one and the same object.”

If the ideas we perceive by sight and touch are indeed fundamentally distinct, why does common speech incline us to think (falsely) that they are the same? I submit that the answer relies on the radically nominalist account. Berkeley hears something, i.e., he immediately perceives some auditory ideas. He signifies these auditory ideas like so: “I hear a coach drive along the street.” Later, he sees something, i.e., he immediately perceives some visual ideas. He signifies these visual ideas like so: “I look through the casement and see [the coach].” Shortly afterward, Berkeley feels something, i.e., he immediately perceives some tactile ideas that he signifies like so: “I walk out and enter into [the coach].” Each of these episodes of

---

137 NTV §46.

138 NTV §48.
perception is distinct. In each case, the ideas Berkeley perceives he perceives immediately. In each case, what Berkeley signifies by the name ‘the coach’ are just some ideas perceived immediately, and so in each case, what is so signified is thereby reputed to be one thing, one ‘sensible object’. And it is because, in common speech, “the same name” is used to signify these different objects that we are inclined to think of these distinct collections of immediately perceived ideas—these different sensible objects—as somehow one. But it is “nevertheless certain” that these collections, these objects, are “widely different and distinct from each other”. This will have to do for now; I will return to this issue in the next chapter.

Two issues need to be addressed: (1) how the mind comes to collect together and signify some of the ideas it immediately perceives with a name-token, and (2) how and why the mind comes to use similar name-tokens to signify distinct collections of immediately perceived ideas.

The first of these is, for lack of a better description, Berkeley’s Kantian problem, and it is indeed a problem. Our sensory ideas are “perpetually fleeting and variable,” and yet somehow we convert this experiential flux into order. It might seem at first that a standard view such as Atherton’s has as good an answer to this problem as Berkeley can give. We experience a flux of sensory ideas. Over time, we come to pick out regularities in the flux, and begin attaching names to those regularities. These regularities are the result of the laws of nature—God’s willing that finite minds perceive a somewhat orderly flux of sensory ideas. But this is no answer to the Kantian problem since it presupposes exactly the type of ability that is at question. In order to recognize regularities within the sensory flux, it cannot be a purely undifferentiated flux; it must be, in some way, already encapsulated. A judgment that

\textit{this} is the same as (or otherwise related to) \textit{that} presupposes an ability to pick out \textit{this} and \textit{that}
from the flux. And it is precisely this ability that Berkeley does not explain. But this is a problem for any interpretation of Berkeley and cuts equally against Atherton’s view as mine.

While this story about perceived regularities fails as an answer to the Kantian problem, it does provide an answer to the second question, namely, how and why the mind comes to use similar name-tokens to signify distinct collections of immediately perceived ideas. However we manage to first pick out units from the perceptual flux, we soon learn how these fleeting and distinct collections are related together, spatially, temporally, or by resemblance. But giving each distinct collection its own unique name would result in an “endless number or confusion of names [and] render language impracticable.”\footnote{3D 2:245. See also Draft Introduction to the \textit{Principles, Works}, 2:128.}

“Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniencies which are obvious upon a little thought, men combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed to have some connexion in Nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name, and consider as one thing.”\footnote{Ibid.}

This passage might appear to be a proof-text against the radically nominalist account. Isn’t Berkeley plainly saying that ideas perceived at different times by different senses are part of one thing—one collection—signified by one name?

I think not; appearances, like language, can be deceiving. The larger context of the passage is perfectly in line with the radically nominalist account. The passage begins with Berkeley precisely \textit{denying} that we see the same object that we feel, even denying that we see the same object with the naked eye as we do with a microscope. It concludes in much the same way:

“Hence it follows that when I examine by my other senses a thing I have seen, it is not in order to understand better the same object which I had perceived by sight, the object of one sense not being perceived by the other senses. And when I look through a microscope, it is not that I may perceive more clearly what I perceived already with my bare eyes,
the object perceived by the glass being quite different from the former.” Here, as with the coach passage, I take Berkeley to be making the same point. The objects we perceive by sense—‘sensible objects’—are collections of constantly changing immediately perceived ideas, and so there are innumerably many such collections each perceived only for a moment. But for pragmatic purposes, we use tokens of the “same” name—“one” name—to pick out many different collections: we call the round thing we see, the smooth thing we feel, and the sweet thing we taste each of them ‘apple’. So, though we might be tempted by common ways of speech to regard these similarly-named collections as somehow one, if we pay attention not to the signs but the ideas thereby signified, we will see that they are nevertheless distinct collections of ideas immediately perceived.

I conclude that Berkeley is best understood as holding this radically nominalist account of sensible objects. If we accept that the collections of ideas that Berkeley calls sensible objects are collections of immediately perceived ideas, then it follows straightforwardly that sensible objects are immediately perceived. We can acknowledge that the man born blind and made to see fails to “see” the sphere or the cube without admitting that perception of the sphere and cube fails the “first conferred” criterion. As we have already seen, the man born blind perceives all the visual ideas that a normally sighted person perceives. His only failure is the ability to apply names to his visual ideas, not a failure to perceive them. However, since there is nothing to the collection of ideas that a normally sighted person would call “sphere” beyond the ideas the man born blind also perceives when his sense is first conferred upon him, there is no reason to think that the collection is not likewise perceived immediately and in exactly the same sense that the proper objects of perception are perceived immediately. On this reading, Berkeley’s claims that we immediately perceive sensible objects are strictly true (which Atherton must deny), and true univocally of
sensible objects as well as the proper objects of perception (which Pappas and Ayers deny).

Not only does the radically nominalist interpretation mesh with the hybrid ideational theory and allow us to take Berkeley at face value in claiming that sensible objects are immediately perceived, it provides the resources for finally cutting through the Gordian Knot of Berkeley’s metaphysics. For if the being of sensible objects is nothing but their being perceived, what are we to think about putative objects that are unperceived? Do they simply cease to exist? As with the Puzzle of Immediacy, the so-called Problem of Continuity has generated a rough dichotomy among scholars, between proponents of some version of the collection theory and those (such as Winkler) who read Berkeley as a sort of phenomenalist with respect to unperceived sensible objects. In the next chapter, we will explore the Problem of Continuity, some of its proposed solutions, and see how the radically nominalist account of sensible objects can be used to dissolve the problem.
CHAPTER 3: THE PROBLEM OF CONTINUITY

Every beginner philosophy student learns that Berkeley denies the existence of matter and holds instead that the existence of sensible objects consists in being perceived. She also learns that Berkeley holds that sensible objects exist continuously, even during periods where no finite mind perceives them, since God always perceives them. It is such a commonplace that few scholars think the basic issue worthy of much consideration. In this paper, however, I argue that this story about Berkeley is fundamentally wrong. The business about God preserving objects in existence by eternally perceiving them is an answer Berkeley does not give to a question that he does not ask.

The interpretive story that I mean to be challenging here is not told only to beginning students. Scholarly commentaries offer more detailed accounts of how sensible objects continue to exist, sometimes claiming unperceived existence is a lesser form of existence, sometimes downplaying God’s perception. But interpretations that call into question the basic view that Berkeleian sensible objects do (obviously!) exist continuously in the gaps between the episodes of their being perceived by finite minds are exceedingly rare.

141 Though, the prevalence and naïveté of this view among non-scholars is quite striking. Take, for example, this very brief “intellectual biography” from a Berkeley fan page on Facebook: “Bishop of the Church of Ireland, Berkeley was an influential philosopher, famous for his theory summed up in ‘esse est percipi’, ‘to be is to be perceived.’ Believing that we can only know directly the ideas of objects, and not abstractions thereof, such as matter. This leads to Berkeley’s ‘Great Perceiver’ argument, which states that in order for the world to exist, there must be one who sees everything all of the time. This being, for Berkeley, is God.”

142 Only Jonathan Bennett comes to mind. In his Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes (1971, 171), he argues that Berkeley, “does not regularly assume that objects exist when no human perceives them; he is not much interested in whether they do” (my emphasis). The claims that Berkeley does not assume sensible objects exist continuously or that he does not assume this regularly are, of course, consistent with his maintaining they do so anyway. Bennett rehearses this same line in his (2001, 180-188, esp. 181).
contrary, anything containing a summary of Berkeley’s philosophy is likely to contain a passage something like this:

Berkeley does not deny that there are bodies or that they continue to exist when he stops perceiving them; but his belief in their continued existence clearly depends on his belief that other perceivers exist, and especially on his belief that there is an infinite spirit who perceives all the bodies that compose the universe.143

Or, again:

Without a doubt then Berkeley’s official teaching on existence in the mind is that objects of sense may go in and out of the small circle of the mind of man, but do not thereby go in and out of existence; for they are conserved in the great circle of the mind of God. Therefore, the furniture in the room is not reduced to nothing when I shut my eyes.144

Both passages seem to express the following line of thought:

1-A. Bodies are collections of ideas, which exist when and only when they are perceived by some mind.

2-A. God always perceives certain ideas (bodies).

So even though:

3-A. Some ideas (bodies) are not always perceived by any finite mind.

It still follows that:

4-A. Existing bodies need not be perceived by any finite mind; bodies typically enjoy a continuous existence even when unperceived by any finite mind.

Let us call the conclusion that bodies continue to exist even when not perceived by any finite mind the continuity thesis (CT). More precisely, since bodies are collections of ideas, and since Berkeley countenances no infinite minds other than God, let us reformulate the thesis as follows:

143 McCracken (2002, 446).

144 Luce (1968, 291-2).
CT: Bodies continue to exist even when not perceived by any finite mind because they are always perceived by God.

In this chapter, I argue that the view outlined above and expressed in the argument I have constructed is not Berkeley’s because Berkeley does not hold CT. As I interpret his texts, Berkeley is not committed to CT. It would serve no philosophical purpose for him and indeed, his holding it is in many ways inconsistent with the main thrust of his immaterialism and other views he does clearly hold.

3.1: A GUIDED TOUR OF THE PROBLEM

The CT is a curt expression of three separable theses: that sensible objects exist continuously when unperceived by finite minds; that God always perceives sensible objects; and that it is because of God’s ever-watchful perception that sensible objects exist continuously.145

Let us call the first of these the Bare Continuity Thesis (BCT). The thesis that God always perceives sensible objects we will call the Omni-Perception Thesis (OPT). We will call the thesis that it is because of God’s ever-watchful perception alone that sensible objects exist continuously the Perceptual Dependence Thesis (PDT).

The most prominent standard interpretations—which fall under what I will call the collection theory—and the naïve version of this view prevalent among students accept all three. On the collection theory, sensible objects are collections of a huge number of ideas perceived by various different minds (including God) at various different times, including (depending on the particular interpretation) ideas possibly (but not actually) perceived by actual (and possible) minds. For a sensible object to exist is for this collection to exist. But

145 These are not carefully distinguished in the secondary literature. My treatment of these owes much to Ken Winkler’s comments on an earlier version of this paper.
since most of the members of the collection do not exist at any given time, the existence of the collection cannot be tied to the existence of all of its members; rather, the collection exists if some sufficient number of its members exist, i.e., are perceived by some mind. \(^{146}\) And an object exists continuously from \(t_1\) to \(t_3\) just in case a sufficient number of the members of the collection that constitutes the object are perceived at all times from \(t_1\) to \(t_3\).

If both \(\text{OPT}\) and \(\text{PDT}\) are true, then \(\text{BCT}\) follows straightforwardly.

There appear to be texts to support this reading, perhaps none better than this from the Third Dialogue:

> When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind ... There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them ... And as the same is true, with regard to all other finite created spirits; it necessarily follows, there is an omnipresent eternal Mind, which knows and comprehends all things. \(^{147}\)

Both \(\text{BCT}\) and \(\text{OPT}\) find expression here, and \(\text{PDT}\) seems the most likely way to connect the two. It would seem then that the standard collection theory and even the naïve view are more or less on the right track.

The standard line is not without difficult problems, however. One of these problems stems from \(\text{OPT}\), for there is some reason to think that, in fact, Berkeley’s God doesn’t perceive at all. To be sure, there are places where Berkeley writes about God perceiving, though it must be noted that the passage above is not one of them. Earlier in the Second

\(^{146}\) Just what counts as a sufficient number of members is, as far as I can tell, not explored in detail in the secondary literature.

\(^{147}\) 3D 2:230-1. All references to Berkeley’s works correspond to the nine volume \textit{The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne}, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd., 1948-57). For works such as the \textit{Principles} and \textit{An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision} which are divided into sections, references hereafter will include the abbreviation and section number followed by the volume and page numbers (e.g., PHK 1, 2:41, or NTV 10, 1:173). References to the \textit{Three Dialogues} will include just the dialogue, volume and page numbers (e.g., 3D 2:227). References to the \textit{Notebooks} will include notebook (A or B), entry number, volume and page number (e.g., NB B165, 1:23). References to \textit{Alciphron} will include abbreviation, dialogue, section number, volume and page number (e.g. A VII:2, 3: 287).
Dialogue, however, Philonous distinguishes his view from the materialist’s by invoking just such perception language:

Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God, whereas I on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by him.148

However clear this statement might be, a closer look shows that Berkeley is not entirely comfortable speaking of God’s perception. There are actually only a handful of places where Berkeley uses the term “perceive” or one of its cognates to describe God, and all of these occur in the more casually written *Three Dialogues*.149 He much prefers to speak of God’s “knowing” (as he does here) or “comprehending” or merely “having” ideas, without saying that these ideas are “perceived.”150 (Moreover, the passages where he does invoke divine perception each occur in contexts where Berkeley is trying to respond to claims that his philosophy is dangerously heterodoxical. George Thomas takes this apologetic context to weaken the case for reading these as explicit endorsements of divine perception.151)

Berkeley has a good reason, internal to his philosophy, to resist endorsing the view that God perceives, at least not without serious qualification. Perception, he writes, consists in the “passive reception of ideas.”152 God, however, is “an impassive, indivisible, purely active being” (which is largely why no idea, being purely passive, can represent God).153 For God to

148 3D 2:212.
149 In sections 70-71 of the *Principles*, Berkeley does indeed mention God’s perception, but only in the process of laying out and then criticizing a response to his attacks on matter. Thus, this is not an instance of Berkeley invoking (for his own purposes) God’s perception.
150 See, for example: NB 675; 3D 2:212, 231, 235-6, 248.
151 See Thomas (1976, 166).
152 NB 301. See also NB 378, 756.
perceive (strictly speaking) would be for God to be in some way passive, which Berkeley
denies and which would be theologically dangerous to assert. Yet it would be equally
theologically problematic to deny that God has knowledge of everything and at all times. So,
Berkeley maintains that God “has” ideas—that he “knows and comprehends” all things—but
it would seem too strong of a move for him to assert strictly that God perceives His
ideas. If God can’t be said to perceive His ideas, then it cannot be true that He always
perceives sensible objects (as opposed to knowing them). So, there is a case to be made that
OPT is not Berkeley’s settled view.⁸¹⁴

This case against divine perception probably overstates the matter; the view that
Berkeley’s God does not perceive at all is certainly a minority opinion. But even allowing that
the relationship between God and whatever ideas He has can be called one of perception,
this is not enough to ensure OPT or the standard view that sensible objects exist
continuously in virtue of God’s perception of them. There are two reasons for this. First,
Berkeley is quite clear that sensible objects are collections of sensible ideas, or more precisely,
that they are collections of ideas which are only perceived by sense. This is the subject of a
rather lengthy exchange in the First Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous, the conclusion
of which is that, “sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by
sense.”⁸¹⁵ But Berkeley is equally explicit that God “perceives nothing by sense,” both
because God has no body, and so no sensory organs, and because to perceive by sense is
again paradigmatic of the passive reception of ideas.⁸¹⁶ So it seems to follow

---

¹⁵⁴ The best case against attributing OPT to Berkeley can be found in Thomas (1976).

¹⁵⁵ 3D 2:175.

¹⁵⁶ 3D 2:241.
straightforwardly that God does not perceive sensible objects, whatever other ideas he might perceive.

One might respond, however, that though God might not perceive ideas by sense, He might still perceive ideas of sense, i.e., what Berkeley typically calls sensible qualities; tastes, smells, colors, etc. If this were the case, then God might easily be said to perceive sensible objects, just not sensorily. This is an intriguing suggestion, however, I do not see that Berkeley himself actually considered the view, and moreover, he appears to be committed to its denial. First, if “sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense,” and if “God perceives nothing by sense,” it seems straightforward that God does not perceive sensible objects or ideas, especially given Berkeley’s tendency to use ‘thing’ to refer not just to objects, which are collections of ideas, but to single ideas.\textsuperscript{157} Secondly, a good portion of the First Dialogue is aimed at convincing Hylas (and the reader) that sensible qualities such as heat and sound are as mind-dependent as sensations of pleasure and pain by arguing that such qualities are \textit{inseparable} from such sensations. Philonous asserts, “this same simple idea is \textit{both} the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; … the intense heat immediately perceived is \textit{nothing distinct} from a particular sort of pain.”\textsuperscript{158} This would have no direct bearing on the issue of God’s perception were it not for Berkeley’s explicit denial that God is capable of suffering pain.

\textit{[T]hat God, though he knows and sometimes causes painful sensations in us, can Himself suffer pain, I positively deny. … [I]t is evident, such a being as this can suffer nothing, nor be affected with any painful sensation, or indeed \textit{any sensation at all}. … God is a pure spirit[.] No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind. To know every thing knowable is certainly a perfection; but to endure, or suffer, or \textit{feel any thing by sense}, is an imperfection.}\textsuperscript{159}

\textsuperscript{157}See, for example, NB 644, 656, 657a, and 658.

\textsuperscript{158}3D 176, my emphasis.

\textsuperscript{159}3D 240-1, my emphasis.
If God cannot suffer—that is, feel—pain, and if pain is inseparable from the perception of other sensible ideas, then I see no way to maintain that God can nevertheless perceive sensible objects which include such sensible ideas as constituents.\(^{160}\)

There is a second reason that granting that God perceives His ideas in some way will not secure BCT, even if one overlooks the problem of how God can perceive sensible objects in the first place. For, among the ideas in God’s mind are those of objects and events that do not ever actually exist. This seems to generate a dilemma. If being perceived by God is sufficient to preserve an actual sensible object in its existence independent of the perception of finite minds, then it should be sufficient to ensure the actual existence of all “merely possible objects” as well. And if merely possible objects do not exist (in the strict sense) despite being ideas in God’s mind, then it is not clear how being perceived by God is enough to ensure the continuous existence of actual sensible objects. As George Pitcher writes, on the standard line “the kind of existence that Berkeley accords to unperceived objects of this world … is precisely the kind that objects in merely possible, but non-actual worlds, have—e.g., the kind and amount that a purple man with three heads has.”\(^{161}\) It is hard to see, though, how anyone concerned about the continuity of unperceived sensible objects would be satisfied with the response that they exist in the same manner as three-headed purple men. What this suggests is that even if OPT is true, PDT is false; since God perceives ideas of both actual and merely possible objects, it cannot be in virtue of His perception alone that actual sensible objects continue to exist.

---

\(^{160}\) At any rate, the burden of proof is on the one who claims God perceives sensible ideas even if not by sense. For my purposes here, it is enough that Berkeley does not explicitly endorse the view that God perceives sensible ideas, whatever other ideas he might perceive.

\(^{161}\) Pitcher (1977, 171-2). See also Winkler (1986, 91-4).
Though divine perception alone may be insufficient for continuity, this does not show that it is irrelevant to the matter. As Kenneth Winkler has shown, Berkeley denies that God is a blind agent; i.e. for Berkeley, volition presupposes perception. According to Winkler, “every volition has an object, content, or specification, and it is this object or specification that differentiates between my willing one thing and my willing something else.” So, one way to distinguish actual sensible objects from merely possible ones is by appealing, not to God’s ideas, but to his will. Both actual and merely possible objects are perceived (or known, or comprehended) by God, but only the former are willed by God to be perceivable by finite minds in particular circumstances. On this line, then, actual sensible objects—“real things”—exist independently of finite minds because God wills that finite minds do or would perceive them under such and such conditions. This is the phenomenalist interpretation championed most notably by Winkler.

We have reached the phenomenalist interpretation via a consideration of the faults of the standard collection theory. The standard view relies too heavily on divine perception and guarantees BCT only by maintaining both OPT and PDT. Of these latter theses OPT may be granted, albeit carefully qualified, but the phenomenalist interpretation (rightly) rejects PDT. Instead, the phenomenalist maintains that only divine activity is sufficient for the existence of sensible objects, both perceived and finitely unperceived. A real sensible object exists just in case either God wills that some finite mind does perceive it or that some finite mind would perceive it under such and such circumstances. Actual sensible objects can be said to exist unperceived just in case a conditional of this latter kind is true, whereas these conditionals are false for merely possible sensible objects. And, because of the denial of blind agency, when an actual sensible object exists unperceived by finite minds, it is indeed

---

162 Winkler (1986, 85).
perceived by the divine mind, since God’s willing that some finite mind would perceive it under certain circumstances requires God’s perception of (the object of) his willing. The phenomenalist interpretation then accepts BCT and OPT but denies PDT.\textsuperscript{163} In place of PDT, the phenomenalist interpretation accepts that an object exists if and only if God \textit{intends to cause} certain object-ideas in the minds of finite spirits. Let us call this the Volitional Dependence Thesis (VDT).

To an extent, I think the phenomenalist line is right. There is a good deal of textual support in its favor. Berkeley apparently relies on just this sort of phenomenalist line in response to questions about the Mosaic story of creation. Presented with the challenge that if God perceives the sensible world, He perceives it eternally and so no sense can be made of its creation in time, Philonous responds thus:

“May we not understand it to have been entirely in respect of finite spirits; so that things, with regard to us, may properly be said to begin their existence, or be created, when God decreed that they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures[?]”\textsuperscript{164}

Not only does Berkeley here hinge the creation of sensible objects on their becoming perceptible (and not simply perceived) by finite minds, but this change in perceptibility turns on a feature of God’s will—His decreeing it so (or His having decreed it to be so). This is just as the phenomenalist would have it.

This is not, however, how Berkeley would have it. While the phenomenalist interpretation avoids the issues involved with taking God’s perception of sensible objects alone to be necessary and sufficient for their continuous existence, it does so at the cost of textual fidelity. On the phenomenalist view, a sensible object exists continuously even

\textsuperscript{163} The version of the phenomenalist interpretation I present here is roughly Winkler’s. However, one might hold a phenomenalist interpretation without accepting the denial of blind agency. I think accepting the denial of blind agency makes the phenomenalist interpretation as compelling as possible, and so I will not deal with other versions here.

\textsuperscript{164} 3D 2:253.
though unperceived by any finite mind just in case God wills that a finite mind would perceive certain object-ideas under certain circumstances, i.e., if God intends to cause certain ideas in finite minds. As Winkler notes, “because God’s intentions do not depend on the existence of finite spirits, objects can exist even if we do not.”\textsuperscript{165} God’s intentions surely involve divine ideas, but as we already noted, it is not merely the perception of the ideas that guarantees the continuous-while-unperceived-(by finite minds) existence of sensible objects. But this shift of focus from divine ideas to divine will correlates with a shift in the conception of sensible objects. According to the phenomenalist interpretation, Berkeleian sensible objects are not collections of ideas. In Winkler’s own words, “phenomenalism dispenses with natural objects without putting anything in their place.”\textsuperscript{166} He writes:

> Instead of identifying the table in my study with my idea, your idea, God’s idea, or a collection of ideas that somehow embraces them all—instead of supplying a denotation for the expression ‘the table in my study’—the phenomenalist concentrates on statements about the table, and treats them as statements that demand no more for their truth than the actual and possible perception of ideas.\textsuperscript{167}

The problem with this approach is that, for Berkeley, sensible objects are precisely collections of ideas. The phenomenalist interpretation simply crushes under the weight of the texts where Berkeley identifies objects with ideas or collections thereof.\textsuperscript{168} Most damaging is the famous cherry passage:

> I see this cherry, I feel it, I taste it: and I am sure nothing cannot be seen, or felt, or tasted: it is therefore real. Take away the sensations of softness, moisture, redness, tartness, and you take away the cherry. Since it is not a being distinct from sensations; a cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas

\textsuperscript{165} Winkler (1986, 95).

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. 83.

\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., original emphasis.

\textsuperscript{168} See, for starters, PHK 3, 4, 33, 38; 3D 2:235, 262.
perceived by various senses: which ideas are united into one thing (or have one name given them) by the mind; because they are observed to attend each other.\(^{169}\)

The principal difficulty for the phenomenalist line is that in emphasizing God’s activity and grounding the existence of sensible objects in His intentions, it generates an account of sensible objects that no longer accommodates Berkeley’s insistence that the esse of sensible objects is percipi. On VDT, a sensible object exists just in case God intends that a finite mind does (or would) perceive certain ideas under certain circumstances. But then it is false that to take away the sensations is to take away the cherry. As the phenomenalist maintains, “because God’s intentions do not depend on the existence of finite spirits, objects can exist even if we do not.” That is, God can intend to produce ideas without actually so producing them. So, there is no reason that sensible objects such as a cherry cannot exist even when no minds perceive sensations of softness, redness, tartness, etc. But if that is true, the phenomenalist will be hard pressed to explain Philonous’ remarks about the cherry.

One might expect the proponent of the phenomenalist interpretation to turn again to the denial of blind agency and point out that, so long as God intends to cause cherry-perceptions in finite minds under certain circumstances, God Himself perceives the cherry. Philonous’ claim that if you take away the sensations, you take away the cherry is true; it’s just that God perceives the sensations as a necessary concomitant of his intending to produce the same ideas in finite minds. So (on this response), it’s not true that the phenomenalist account allows for sensible objects to exist in a way that violates the esse is percipi thesis.

Notice, though, that this response essentially turns the phenomenalist position back into the standard view, for it is now God’s perception of the cherry-ideas that He intends to

\(^{169}\) 3D 2: 249, my emphasis.
produce in other minds that is operating to diffuse the objection. It is not because God intends to produce cherry-ideas in finite minds that squares the phenomenalist interpretation with the cherry passage. It is only because, in intending to produce the sensations, God also perceives them that makes sense of Philonous’ claim about the cherry’s nature as a congeries of sensations. What is worse for the phenomenalist, he is now forced to deal with the same issues of God’s perception that motivated a move away from the standard view in the first place. The principal virtue of the phenomenalist interpretation is its putative ability to ignore questions about divine ideas. But to accommodate the numerous passages where Berkeley identifies sensible objects with collections or congeries of ideas, whose esse is percipi, the phenomenalist must take into account not simply God’s intentions, but His perception as well.

Let us take stock. An enduring question for Berkeley scholarship is, if the being of sensible objects consists in their being perceived, what are we to say about sensible objects that exist unperceived (at least by finite minds)? The standard view maintains that God continuously perceives sensible objects, and that His perception alone preserves the object in existence during periods when no finite mind perceives it. But we have seen not only that Berkeley has reservations about God’s perception in general, but also that God’s perception—even if unproblematic—is insufficient to secure continuity since God perceives equally both actual objects and possible but non-actual objects. The phenomenalist view, on the other hand, appears ready-made to deal with this issue. According to the phenomenalist interpretation, sensible objects exist just in case God intends to produce ideas in finite minds under certain circumstances. A sensible object then exists continuously at times when no finite mind actually perceives it just in case, during that time, God intends to produce the relevant ideas should any finite minds happen to be in the right circumstances. But on this
account, the esse of sensible objects is no longer percipi, since God’s intentions do not require the actual finite perception of any of the ideas he intends to produce. There are also numerous texts that show Berkeley identified sensible objects with the collections of ideas that the phenomenalist interpretation discards. And, if the phenomenalist invokes the denial of blind agency and points to God’s perception of the ideas he intends to produce, the phenomenalist account degenerates into the standard view.

The problems for both types of view, I think, stem from the same source, namely the presupposition that Berkeley thought of sensible objects as having a continuous existence in the first place. Both views take continuity as a given, necessary datum to be accounted for by Berkeley’s metaphysics of sensible objects. The standard view and the phenomenalist interpretation both deliver accounts of sensible objects that are, in part, aimed precisely at accounting for continuity. As we have seen, both accounts fall short as interpretations of Berkeley, either philosophically, textually, or both.

At this point, one might have the sense that the problem lies not in our interpretations, but in Berkeley himself. Perhaps there is no coherent view about sensible objects or continuity to be found in Berkeley’s works. Berkeley was, no doubt, a very gifted philosopher, but his life was dominated by other concerns; his philosophical career was furious but brief when compared to the decades-long work of Leibniz or Kant. Should we not simply accept that, in some places, Berkeley writes as if God perceives sensible objects when no one else does, and in others, he writes as if he accepted a form of phenomenalism—and that there really is no systematic way to read him on the matter? Of course, this is always a possibility that one must consider, but we should only consider it as a last resort. Before doing so, I want to consider a different possibility.
3.2: Radical Nominalism Redux

As we have seen, the standard collection theory and the phenomenalist interpretation both assume that sensible objects do enjoy a continuous existence irrespective of the perception of finite minds. As we have also seen, both accounts fall short in some measure. If we want to know whether Berkeleian sensible objects exist continuously during times when no finite mind perceives them—and, if so, in what way—, we need to have a clearer idea of just what Berkeleian sensible objects are, how they are related to the minds that perceive them and the mind that produces them. The radically nominalist account of sensible objects introduced in the previous chapter

Let us look at a more detailed application of the radically nominalist account and compare it to a model of the standard view. Take, again, the notoriously difficult coach passages, versions of which appear in both the New Theory of Vision and the Dialogues. Here is the original version:

Sitting in my study I hear a coach drive along the street; I look through the casement and see it; I walk out and enter it; thus, common speech would incline one to think, I heard, saw, and touched the same thing, to wit, the coach. It is nevertheless certain, the ideas intromitted by each sense are widely different, and distinct from each other; but having been observed constantly to go together, they are spoken of as one and the same thing.\(^{170}\)

We might model these three brief episodes referred to as “perceiving the coach” on the standard view as follows:

\(^{170}\) NTV §46. The parallel passage occurs in 3D 2: 204.
Let $V_n$, $A_n$, $T_n$, $O_n$, and $G_n$ stand for visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory ideas perceived by a particular mind at some time $t_n$. Let the arrow-ended bubble represent the entire collection of ideas that constitutes the coach, noting that some but not all of the ideas perceived by a particular mind at times $t_1$-$t_3$ are included in the collection. In Figure 1.1, the collection of ideas that Berkeley identifies with the coach is constituted by an indefinite number of ideas of each of the five sensory modalities, perceived at an indefinite number of times by an indefinite number of minds, of which Berkeley himself only perceives a small number. Berkeley hears something at $t_1$.¹⁷¹ He looks out the window and sees a coach, i.e.,

---

¹⁷¹ The point of both versions of the coach passage seems to be that the sound of the coach merely suggests the coach and is not, as it were, a constituent of the coach itself. I am willing to grant this as an amendment to the standard view as I present it here. However, for the sake of argument, let us suppose that the collections of ideas that are sensible objects do contain as members ideas perceived by each of the sensory modalities.
he perceives certain visual ideas that are members of the coach-collection at t2. He walks outside and enters the coach, i.e., he perceives certain visual and tactile ideas that are likewise members of the coach-collection at t3.

When we inquire into just how each of Berkeley’s three uses of ‘the coach’ (or terms anaphoric for ‘the coach’, i.e., ‘it’ at t2 and t3) manage to signify the entire collection, the standard view has no ready answer. Two responses suggest themselves. One might take the term ‘coach’ to signify the entire collection directly in each instance of its use, without appeal to the perception of any particular members of the collection at any particular time. This is roughly modeled in Figure 1.1. On this line of thought, the significatory relationship between ‘coach’ and the entire collection is brute, and each use of ‘coach’ manages to signify the ideas perceived at those times by “trickling down” from the entire collection; ‘coach’ signifies, first and foremost, the entire collection and particular uses of ‘coach’ signify some subset of the members of the collection in a derivative way.

Alternatively, one might think ‘coach’ manages to signify the entire collection only by first coming to signify some occurrently perceived members of the collection. This can be modeled roughly as follows.
On the view represented in Figure 1.2, instances of ‘coach’ signify, first and foremost, some occurrently perceived ideas—what Berkeley hears, or sees, or sees and feels—and come to signify the entire collection to which these ideas belong by “bubbling up” from the occurrently perceived ideas.

There are a number of features of these models to note. First, while either model of the standard view allows us to say, literally, the same thing was perceived at t1, t2, and t3, this is a “commonsensical” consequence Berkeley himself did not care to draw. In fact, he claims exactly the opposite: “common speech would incline one to think, I heard, saw, and touched the same thing, to wit, the coach. It is nevertheless certain, the ideas intromitted by each sense are widely different, and distinct from each other[1]”\(^\text{172}\). If the standard view is right in considering

\(^{172}\) NTV §46, my emphasis.
the coach as a collection of ideas that contains ideas of different sense modalities, then it is puzzling why Berkeley pointedly highlights the heterogeneity of these ideas. Second, the standard view is highly complex, and as a result, faces difficult epistemological questions. So again, the same thing was perceived at t1, t2, and t3—but how does one know this? How does one know that the coach-collection contains members other than the ones perceived at t1-t3, especially if the large bulk of these putative members are perceived by other minds? Berkeley suggests the basis for speaking of the seen coach and the sat-in coach as the same things is that such visual and tactile ideas are “observed constantly to go together,” but this is true only of the ideas any one mind perceives. It is very hard to see how an appeal to an observed correlation between visual and tactile ideas can ground the claim that the coach-collection contains ideas beyond those actually perceived by the particular mind in question.

Perhaps just as problematically, on either model of the standard view, it is very difficult to say that sensible objects are perceived immediately. All that is immediately perceived are a few members of a much larger collection; the rest of the collection is merely suggested to the mind by the ideas immediately perceived. This is of great import, for it is Berkeley’s principal complaint against representative realism that such a view entails insurmountable skeptical problems, problems Berkeley himself intends to avoid by defending a view on which sensible objects are immediately perceived.\(^\text{173}\)

Though both views are problematic, the view modeled in Figure 1.2 has an advantage in that we have a better explanation for how the term ‘coach’ connects to the putative collection it names. The bubble-up approach to the standard view also fits better with Berkeley’s idiosyncratic philosophy of language on which he explicitly rejects the view that a

\(^{173}\) Pappas shows quite clearly, I think, the importance of immediate perception to Berkeley in his (2000). However, Pappas is a proponent of a version of the standard view, which presents his interpretation with considerable difficulties that are detailed nicely in Atherton (2008).
word in each instance of its use must signify the same idea(s). Once one accepts that the bubble-up approach is superior to the trickle-down approach, however, the way to an even better account is paved. The coach episodes can be modeled much more simply on the Radically Nominalist account, taking advantage of the insight of the bubble-up approach while dispensing with the conception of the collection of ideas that complicates the standard view.

Figure 3: Radically Nominalist account

On the Radically Nominalist account, what Berkeley signifies with by ‘coach’ at t₁ just is what he hears—auditory ideas A₁—, and so in a very straightforward sense, Berkeley hears the coach. At t₂, what Berkeley signifies by ‘coach’ is just what he sees and hears—visual idea V₂ and auditory ideas A₂—, and so Berkeley sees and hears the coach. At t₃, ‘coach’

174 See PHK Intro 18.
signifies those visual, tactile, and auditory ideas Berkeley perceives as he walks out and enters the coach. At each time, what Berkeley perceives are some sensory ideas that are collected together by the mind and given one name—‘coach’. As Berkeley himself notes, however, these ideas are completely heterogenous and distinct; what he perceives at t1 is metaphysically different from what he perceives at t2 or at t3.

One might object that, on this account, there are as many coaches as there are utterances and inscriptions of ‘coach’ and that this consequence would be absurd, even for Berkeley—surely there is only one coach. If this objection is not read as straightforwardly begging the question against Berkeley’s metaphysics, it is hard to see what is absurd in the view. It is certainly unorthodox, but the appearance of absurdity is only generated by a failure on our part to look past the trappings of language. We are, as Berkeley writes, under the “embarrass and delusion of words.” We need only “draw the curtain of words”; to do as Berkeley’s predecessors attempted (and failed) to do, to “[lay aside] all use of words … and contemplate [our] bare ideas.”

More to the point: first, it is not Berkeley’s view that every utterance or inscription signifies anything, so it is false that there are as many coach-collections as there are instances of the name. Second, it is not at all absurd to think that there are as many perceptions “of” the coach as there are perceivers “of” the coach. Of course, these numerous distinct perceptions are coordinated by God’s reliably and regularly willing them in various minds, but this common source cannot be supposed to make them perceptions “of” one thing, since all our sensory ideas have the same source. So if, as I am arguing, Berkeley identifies

175 PHK Intro 23-24, 2: 39-40

176 And perhaps many more perceptions than perceivers if we consider individual perceptions to be extremely brief or instantaneous, as opposed to temporally extended to a significant degree. Also, I intentionally hedge on the use of ‘of’ here since, as Berkeley himself noted explicitly, its use can be misleading. In this case, it can too easily suggest that there is some (one) thing, independent of any perception, of which one perceives. See NB 660.
‘sensible objects’ with the immediately perceived ideas signified by instances of sensible object names, then there isn’t anything absurd in the interpretation at all. Finally, Berkeley himself denies that any sensible object is one in more than name only, for however one interprets the collections of ideas that are sensible objects, they are collections of metaphysically heterogeneous and distinct ideas.\textsuperscript{177} What makes a collection one thing as opposed to many things is the way it is considered by the mind, which is to say, the words used to signify the ideas. Berkeley himself is quite plain on the matter:

\begin{quote}
[N]umber … is intirely the creature of the mind, considering, either an idea by it self, or any combination of ideas to which it gives one name, \textit{and so makes it pass} for an unit. According as the mind variously combines its ideas, the unit varies; and as the unit, so the number, which is only a collection of units, doth also vary. We call a window one, a chimney one, and yet a house in which there are many windows, and many chimneys, hath an equal right to be called one, and many houses go to the making of one city. In these and the like instances, it is evident the unit constantly relates to the particular draughts the mind makes of its ideas, to which it affixes names, and wherein it includes more or less, as best suits its own ends and purposes.\textsuperscript{178}
\end{quote}

Here then is a summary of the Radically Nominalist account: sensible objects are both collections of sensible ideas \textit{and} immediately perceived, because they are collections of just those sensible ideas that are immediately perceived and signified by a token of a sensible object name. The membership of any given collection is determined by those ideas signified by a given name-token.

It should be clear by now that Berkeleian sensible objects are, metaphysically, completely unlike what we might pre-theoretically consider them to be. They are not temporally persistent, mind-independent, publicly perceivable, unified things at all. Indeed, the only feature that the sensible objects of Berkeley’s metaphysics have in common with the sensible objects of our pre-theoretical experience is in being called “sensible objects.”

\textsuperscript{177} See again NTV 46, 108, 137, 149; PHK 44; TVV 41.

\textsuperscript{178} NTV 109, my emphasis.
3.3: Regularities in the Gaps

There is much more that needs to be said in defense of the Radically Nominalist account as an interpretation of Berkeley, especially as it regards the issue of whether and how sensible objects exist continuously throughout periods where (we suppose) no finite minds perceive them. If, as I have argued, Berkeley thought of sensible objects as collections of ideas that are immediately perceived by individual minds and signified by sensible object name-tokens, then one might object that I read Berkeley as being committed to a kind of radical discontinuity. This is (so it might be argued) patently absurd as a philosophical view and, a fortiori, as an interpretation of Berkeley.

There is, of course, nothing absurd in the observation that ordinarily when you close your eyes you no longer see anything in front of you. Our experience “of” sensible objects is undeniably gappy; we blink, we shift our eyes, we fidget in our seats, we go to sleep for hours at a time, and in every instance, our perceptions of the world and the objects in it change continuously or go away altogether. What I see now will disappear in a moment when I blink. If I sleep dreamlessly, there is nothing absurd in noting that I perceived nothing at all for several hours. And while more controversial, there is certainly nothing absurd in thinking that this gappy experience of the sensible world is our sole source of information about it. Indeed, this is just what it is to be a strict empiricist, whether in the 18th or 21st centuries, and Berkeley is one such empiricist. So it is hard to see what could be absurd about a view on which (what Berkeley calls) sensible objects are no more than what they are perceived (between the gaps) to be. Certainly nothing in one’s sensory experience could ever count against such a view.

What I am arguing is that Berkeley makes no distinction between the sensible world and the world of our (discontinuous) experience. As with the coach, what we might call our
experience “of a sensible object” is, speaking more strictly, a number of discontinuous experiences, each episode of which might be called “seeing (or hearing, or riding in) the coach.” The appearance that there is a sensible object equally seen, heard, and ridden in is generated—not by our experience of a sensible object—but by our linguistic habit of using the same (or, strictly speaking, similar) words for each discrete episode. As Berkeley notes:

“Strictly speaking, … we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope, which was by the naked eye. But in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind of individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable. Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniences … men combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed however to have some connexion in Nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name, and consider as one thing.”

Strictly speaking then—that is, at the level of ideas—the collections of sensible ideas that Berkeley calls “sensible objects” are no more continuous than our experience, since they are just collections of ideas that are immediately perceived in our (discontinuous) experience. None of this is absurd; indeed, it can be appreciated as a rather simple, straightforward point given what everyone agrees are his commitments.

But there is another sense in which sensible objects obviously do exist continuously, and that is insofar as it is natural and useful to speak of them as such. That is, in language it is practicable and indeed often necessary to speak of sensible objects as enduring continuously in between episodes of perception, as being publicly perceivable, or as being mind-independent. This is because our experience, though discontinuous, is equally regular and well ordered. God wills in a regular way that sensory ideas be perceived by finite minds. These ideas of sense individually come to be called “real things” (i.e., sensible objects) in

---

179 3D, 2: 245.
virtue of their strength, orderliness, and coherence.\textsuperscript{180} The regularity of sensory ideas, along with their resistance to the will of the perceiver, “speak themselves the effects of a mind more powerful and wise than human spirits.”\textsuperscript{181} The law-like regularity of the \textit{perceived} world is in fact a divine language through which God instructs “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 or destructive of them.”\textsuperscript{182}

This discussion of God’s regular activity brings us close again to the phenomeanalist interpretation, however. Recall that the phenomenalist reads Berkeley as holding that a sensible object—say, a table—exists continuously even when unperceived just in case God wills that, if a finite mind were in the right circumstances, it would perceive the table. This would be a problem for the view developed above on which sensible objects are just collections of ideas perceived immediately and signified by name-tokens, since we would have to add to this account a story about subjunctive counterfactuals grounded in the divine will.

There are passages where Berkeley offers what might appear to be a phenomenalist analysis of claims of continuous, unperceived existence. A fine example of this is \textit{Principles 3}:

The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it.

It is indeed tempting to read the second half of this sentence as an affirmation of a phenomenalist framework. It seems as if Berkeley means to offer as translation of the verbal claim “my table exists” (when uttered outside his study) either of two statements; the

\textsuperscript{180} PHK 33.

\textsuperscript{181} PHK 36.

\textsuperscript{182} NTV 147.
counterfactual “if I was in my study I might perceive it,” or the speculative “some other spirit actually does perceive it.” Winkler reads the passage in just this way: “[t]o say that a table exists is sometimes to say that it would be perceived if certain conditions were fulfilled.” 183

In a sense, this is correct, but it remains incomplete. Berkeley is indeed telling us what it means, in a particular case, to say that his table exists. The problem for Winkler and the phenomenalist interpretation is that propositions—such as the unanalyzed “if I was in my study I might perceive it”—aren’t to be had for free. Statements in ordinary language become meaningful, for Berkeley, in virtue of the ideas they signify. 184 Berkeley’s epistemology places severe restrictions on the kinds of ideas that might thereby be signified; in particular, these ideas are all concrete, determinate, non-abstract ideas. To know what a particular utterance means requires knowing which concrete, determinate, non-abstract ideas are signified in that instance. The problem with appealing to counterfactuals to explain the meaning of a statement is that it is not at all clear what concrete, determinate, non-abstract ideas are thereby signified. Put another way, if we follow Winkler in reading PHK 3 as offering “if I was in my study I might perceive [my table]” as an explication of the meaning of “my table exists” (when uttered outside Berkeley’s study), we would still be left with the question: what does it mean to say “if I was in my study I might perceive [my table]”? Even if a good Berkelean account of counterfactuals were to be had, it is not clear what value such counterfactuals would have to Berkeley. As counterfactuals, they concern circumstances that never actually obtain, and so absent other a priori arguments, an empiricist

183 Winkler (1986, 177). See also Ibid. 199.

184 There are several caveats here, laid out nicely in Winkler (1986, ch. 1). However, none of these caveats undermine the central point, namely, that linguistic meaning arises from the level of ideas and cannot be determined solely by an investigation of the surface grammar of an utterance. To my knowledge, the only interpretation that entirely rejects this basic picture of language in Berkeley is Roberts’ (2007).
such as Berkeley cannot assert their truth as evidence in favor of a view. This is not to say that one cannot make well-supported conjectures about the truth of counterfactuals on empiricist grounds, of course, but however well supported, their truth will always be underdetermined by evidence. One might easily determine the truth of the claim “when I return to my study, I will perceive my table.” In Berkeley’s system, the fact that such predictive conditionals are so often true is essentially the argument for God’s existence. And because they so reliably turn out to be true, such conditionals might well lead one to imagine non-actual scenarios and feel confident about what they would perceive in such cases. This confidence, however, has no bearing on whether the counterfactuals in question are true. A person living in a world where all actual experiences are divinely ordered in the right way would have every reason to make confident conjectures about the truth of counterfactuals even if they were all false.

A better way to understand PHK 3 is as Berkeley’s attempt at giving us exactly what is needed to understand the claim “my table exists” (when uttered outside his study), namely, an account of the ideas being immediately signified at the time of the utterance. We should read what follows his “meaning thereby” as a description of the ideas signified by the utterance, not as a translation of the prior sentence. In so doing, we can apply the Radically Nominalist account to this case as well. Berkeley says, “The table I write on exists.” What he “means thereby”—i.e., the ideas he signifies—is his seeing and feeling it, i.e., the visual and tactile ideas he perceives at the time of his utterance. Here, as with the coach passage, the word ‘table’ signifies a collection of ideas perceived immediately.

The same is true for “my table exists” when uttered outside of Berkeley’s study. What Berkeley signifies are some ideas he perceives. But since he is not, ex hypothesi, perceiving any ideas of sense that would normally be considered “the table”, what ideas might he be signifying? I contend they are ideas in Berkeley’s imagination. In telling us what he “means
thereby” in this second utterance, Berkeley is providing a description of what he might imagine when saying “my table exists” even though he is not in his study to perceive it. In saying “my table exists,” he might imagine himself being in his study at some time in the future, perceiving his table. Or he might imagine someone else being in his study perceiving his table. In either case, what Berkeley signifies by ‘table’ signifies a collection of ideas perceived immediately.

On this account, we can make sense of Berkeley’s statements, which on the surface might appear to be endorsements of the Continuity Thesis, without appealing to either divine ideas or unanalyzed counterfactuals. In so doing, we would actually be following the advice Berkeley gives his readers at the end of the Introduction to the *Principles*:

> Whoever therefore designs to read the following sheets, I entreat him to make my words the occasion of his own thinking, and endeavour to attain the same train of thoughts in reading, that I had in writing them.  

185

So yes, Berkeley does in several places say that sensible objects exist continuously even when not perceived by finite minds. But if we follow Berkeley’s own advice and consider what such statements mean—i.e., what ideas are thereby signified—we can see that these statements do not commit Berkeley to any thesis about divine perception or specious counterfactual conditionals. Nor do they commit Berkeley to a view on which sensible objects are “really” more than they are perceived to be, i.e., collections of ideas over and above those perceived by particular minds and signified by particular name-tokens. Berkeley’s statements in ordinary language about sensible objects existing continuously are perfectly consistent with his metaphysical views on which the collections of sensible ideas that are called sensible objects are—as is all of our experience—divinely ordered and unproblematically discontinuous.

185 PHK Intro 25, 2:40.
3.4: Putting the ‘Problem’ to Rest

Berkeley’s philosophy has always invited questions about continuity. It is not unfair to say that Berkeley does not take the issue of continuity very seriously, or at least, not as seriously as commentators think he should have. It is because Berkeley wrote so little about the matter that scholars have had such a difficult time finding a clean, textually appropriate account of how Berkeleian objects can exist continuously but it is, I think, almost unquestioned that an interpretation on which Berkeley can be said to maintain a thick sense of continuity is for that reason a desirable one. But let us ask this question: why exactly would it be a problem for Berkeley if his metaphysics allowed, at the level of ideas, for sensible objects to have a discontinuous existence when unperceived by finite minds?

An obvious response is that the matter is important to combating skepticism. Berkeley mentions his anti-skeptical project in the preface to both the Principles and the Dialogues. What is unclear, however, is how a metaphysics that involves some kind of discontinuity is dangerously skeptical, at least in the sense of skepticism that Berkeley is worried about. His definition of a skeptic is “one who doubted of every thing … or who denies the reality and truth of things.” We know that Berkeley views himself as no such skeptic about either sensible objects or God, of both which there can be “no more reason to doubt, than of our own being.”

It is skepticism about the perceived world—and the dangers this poses for faith—that concerns Berkeley. The metaphysical issue of continuity has no bearing on either, nor could it. Berkeley thought that it was “evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of

---

186 3D, 2:173.

187 See PHK 40 and 3D, 2:257.
human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses” or such objects of knowledge as we get from an introspective accounting of the operations of the mind. Whether gotten from the senses or from introspection, however, all the objects of human knowledge are gotten by experience. Berkeley is the arch empiricist in this regard. Yet the continuous existence of a sensible object when unperceived by any finite mind is not—and could not possibly be—discovered by experience, and so beliefs in the continuous existence of sensible objects would necessarily be unjustified. No possible experience could ever count as evidence that the tree is in the quad when no one perceives it, for any evidence of a thing’s existence would have to be given in experience. Thus, the only possible evidence for any sensible thing’s existence is evidence for its perceived existence. For Berkeley to hold the Continuity Thesis would be for him to hold a thesis that, by his own lights, cannot in principle be supported by any possible appeal to experience: “I do not see how the testimony of sense can be alleged, as a proof for the existence of any thing, which is not perceived by sense.”

I conclude that the so-called Problem of Continuity is no real problem at all. It is certainly not a problem that Berkeley saw as such, which explains why his own discussion of continuity in PHK 45-48 is short, cagey, and dismissive. He does not—there or anywhere—take the opportunity to lay out clearly his metaphysical account of how sensible objects exist continuously. This fact should be nearly inexplicable if the matter of continuity were of the first importance. Rather, the Problem of Continuity is a problem of our own making, one that results from succumbing to the (tempting!) practice of thinking of Berkeleian sensible objects as more than they are perceived to be, i.e., more than collections of ideas perceived immediately and signified by name-tokens. We should stop up vexing ourselves over

188 PHK 40.
Berkeley’s “Problem” of Continuity, for like Berkeleian ideas themselves, it will be a problem only so long as we perceive it to be.
CHAPTER 4: BERKELEY’S ‘DEFENSE’ OF ‘COMMONSENSE’

Throughout this work, I have pointedly avoided discussing an issue that looms large in Berkeley scholarship. This is the issue of if, how, and to what extent Berkeley’s philosophy is a defense of commonsense. I have so far avoided the issue so that the interpretation developed thus far would be insulated, as much as possible, from the pressures that come with thinking of Berkeley as a commonsense philosopher. As we saw in the previous two chapters, thinking of Berkeleian sensible objects in “commonsensical” terms leads to problems; we are led to the collection theory or a kind of phenomenalist reading, both of which either run afoul of Berkeley’s texts or sit uncomfortably with his philosophical commitments. Still, for any interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy to be accepted, it must address Berkeley’s repeated though often ambivalent claims of affinity with commonsense and common people. The interpretation developed so far is, to put it mildly, unconventional even if it does have strong textual support. It is now time to see whether the hybrid ideational theory of language and the corresponding radically nominalist account of sensible objects can be squared with Berkeley’s claims that his philosophy is somehow on the side of commonsense.

Berkeley scholars can hardly resist dealing with the question of how his philosophy relates to commonsense. It is an irresistible question because it first appears that to have a sensational answer. On the one hand, Berkeley claims to “side in all things with the Mob,” and on the other, his denial of the existence of matter seems as contrary to commonsense as any philosophical view can be. The articles, chapters, books and conference papers on this
one aspect of Berkeley’s philosophy alone could make a sizeable bibliography. Interpretations run the gamut, from A. A. Luce’s judgment that Berkeley’s account of the sensible is commonsense itself, to Jonathan Bennett’s pronouncement that Berkeley’s attitude toward commonsense objects is disrespectful. Some commentators interpret Berkeley as “stressing the inviolable nature of our common-sense beliefs,” or as a philosopher with a, “passionate devotion to commonsense.” Others see him as “Janus-faced”, variably siding with and deriding the opinions of the common run of man. Still for others, when Berkeley claims his philosophy accords with commonsense, “according to commonsense turns out to be roughly synonymous with in agreement with me, or … in agreement with those views for which I can offer (what I take to be) conclusive arguments.” On this view, Berkeley’s claims that his philosophy is more in line with commonsense is simply a rhetorical device carrying no philosophical weight.

Luce excepted, most scholars agree that despite Berkeley’s ambition, his philosophical system is at best a poor defense of commonsense and at worst recipe for full-blown skepticism. Hume was one of the first to judge it this way: “all [Berkeley’s] arguments, though otherwise intended, are, in reality, merely sceptical.” To some, Berkeley’s system is such a poor defense of commonsense that they conclude he could not seriously mean what he says. Quoting Bennett:

189 See A. A. Luce (1968) 82, and Jonathan Bennett (2001) 177.


In his published works, I contend, Berkeley had little interest in rescuing the plain person’s beliefs about sensible things. He did not want to connect them rigorously with his ontology, or even to show that this could in principle be done. … Berkeley’s fundamental attitude to the plain person’s trees and stones, in the deployment of his philosophy, was this disrespectful.

Depending on whom you read, Berkeley is either foolishly optimistic or knowingly dissembling, but (nearly) everyone agrees his is no defense of commonsense.

These are disappointing verdicts. Berkeley is too direct and insistent that his philosophy is in some way either a defense of, or consistent with, or at least friendly to commonsense for us to be satisfied with an interpretation that concludes these statements are little more than rhetoric. And he is too keen a philosopher—and from all biographical accounts, too sensible a person—for us to accept that he simply failed to see how far apart his philosophy is from commonsense. What is desirable, then, is an account that (1) makes clear the importance to Berkeley of commonsense such that it is worth defending, (2) explains in what way his system relates to it, and (3) makes it credible to take seriously his claims to have achieved some success in this endeavor.

In what follows, I lay out an interpretation that I think satisfies these three desiderata by giving new answers to two old questions: what does Berkeley think he is defending in the defense of commonsense, and how does he go about defending it? The answers to these questions show that Berkeley’s approach to defending commonsense has been misunderstood. I then examine a pair of competing accounts of how Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is to be understood and show, in virtue of their shared and mistaken assumption about the structure of this defense, that these nevertheless fail to satisfy the three criteria laid out here.

195 Bennett (2001) 177.
4.1: What is Berkeley Defending?

Berkeley’s attitude toward commonsense is *prima facie* ambiguous. He writes in his notebooks that he, “sides in all things with the Mob,” and yet he tells Percival that public rejection of an opinion, “may … pass for an agreement of its truth.”\(^{196}\) In that same letter, he explains his decision not to mention his immaterialism before the body of his *Principles*, “so the notion might steal unawares on the reader, who possibly would never have meddled with a book that he had known contained such paradoxes.” Yet he advertises his *Three Dialogues* as an effort to recast the material of the *Principles* in a new light, proclaiming that, “if the principles, which I here endeavour to propagate, are admitted for true […] atheism and scepticism will be utterly destroyed, many intricate points made plain, great difficulties solved, several useless parts of science retrenched, speculation referred to practice, and men reduced from paradoxes to common sense.”\(^{197}\)

Since he has much less reason to be dissembling in his letter to Percival than in the advertisements for his published works, it would be easy to judge that Berkeley’s real view is that his philosophy is openly in conflict with commonsense. We would then have to take the proclamations to the contrary in his published works as a disingenuous campaign to sell idealism to his readers. This would be unsatisfying since the whole conceit of the *Dialogues* is a debate over which of two views—Berkeley’s idealism or a Lockean style materialism—is, “most agreeable to common sense, and remote from skepticism.”\(^{198}\) Of course Berkeley’s verdict is that it is his views which are closer to commonsense than materialism. So, we’d

---

\(^{196}\) *Notebooks*, A §405; Letter to Percival, *Works* vol. 8, 36.

\(^{197}\) Berkeley, Preface to the *Dialogues*, *Works* vol. 2, 168.

have to take the entirety of the *Dialogues* as an intentional misrepresentation of idealism on Berkeley’s part. This would be a distasteful reading, if for no other reason than that he is not prone to dissembling without later disclosing his deceit, which he never does in this case.\(^{199}\)

Berkeley’s verdict in the *Dialogues* is made all the more perplexing when we see just how often he explicitly disagrees with what he recognizes as views of the Vulgar. He is perfectly happy to label some beliefs as “vulgar errors,” such as the belief that tangible objects exist independently of our minds or that ideas of sight and touch can be ideas of one single thing.\(^{200}\) And he is well aware of the weakness of *argumentum ad populum*, to the point of considering a view’s popularity as a mark against it. Berkeley writes:

> [T]hough we should grant a notion to be ever so universally and stedfastly adhered to, yet this is but a weak argument of its truth, to whoever considers what a vast number of prejudices and false opinions are everywhere embraced with the utmost tenaciousness, by the unreflecting (which are the far greater) part of mankind.\(^{201}\)

As already noted, Berkeley is clearly conscious that his own views depart from the views of most people. Here, in more context, from his letter to Percival:

> The common cries being against any opinion seems to me so far from proving it false that it may with as good reason pass for an agreement of its truth. However I imagine whatever doctrine contradicts vulgar and settled opinion had need been introduced with great caution into the world. For this reason it was I omitted all mention of the non-existence of matter in the title-page, dedication, preface, and introduction, that so the notion might steal unawares on the reader, who possibly would never have meddled with a book that he had known contained such paradoxes.\(^{202}\)

---

\(^{199}\) In at least two cases, Berkeley made a conscious effort to conceal the full implications of his views, and in both cases he later admitted it. In his *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley granted that objects of touch have a mind-dependent existence, noting later in the *Principles* that this “vulgar error” was, “beside my purpose to examine and refute … in a discourse concerning vision” (*PHK* §44). Similarly, he tells Percival of his decision to omit mention of his immaterialism in “the title-page, dedication, preface, and introduction [of the *Principles*], that so the notion might steal unawares on the reader” (Letter to Percival, *Works* vol. 8, 36).

\(^{200}\) See, respectively, *PHK* §44 and *Alciphron IV*, *Works* vol. 3, 161.

\(^{201}\) Berkeley, *PHK* §55.

Acknowledgements of his heterodoxy are not restricted to Berkeley’s private writings. In the Preface to PHK, he makes no apology for the “novelty and singularity” of his views, “newly known and contrary to the prejudices of mankind.” At PHK 4, he says of the “opinion strangely [i.e., very greatly] prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived,” that it involves a manifest contradiction. Clearly, a belief’s being commonly held is, by itself, of little worth in Berkeley’s eyes, especially when it comes to views that run counter to his own philosophy. This is perhaps why Bennett and others find it more plausible to completely disregard Berkeley’s claims to be defending commonsense and why others see him as simply labeling his own philosophy ‘commonsense’ for rhetorical points.

In light of the texts we have already seen, it is actually somewhat surprising that Berkeley is so often taken to be defending common opinions as such. The case for such a reading him as doing so is surely overstated. (Just how overstated will become very clear in the next section.) Berkeley’s notebook comment that he sides “in all things with the Mob” is most often quoted in isolation from the first sentence of the entry: “All things in Scripture wch side with the Vulgar against the Learned side with me also.” In context, it is much less clear that Berkeley sides with the Vulgar in all things. (For what if scripture sides against the Vulgar? Whose side would Bishop Berkeley take?)

If we are to take seriously Berkeley’s claims that his philosophy is a defense of commonsense, we must be prepared to entertain the as-yet-unexplored possibility that

---


204 I follow Winkler in this reading. Berkeley uses this same obsolete meaning of ‘strangely’ elsewhere. See Winkler (1989) 5.

Berkeley’s defense of commonsense has very little to do with providing a philosophical defense of vulgar beliefs, and much more to do with responding to a philosophical attack on vulgar beliefs that, in Berkeley’s opinion, would replace those beliefs with something even less acceptable. What little concern Berkeley does have for (a very few) commonly held beliefs arises not from a sense of respect for their being commonly held but from his realization of their importance to his anti-skeptical project. To see how and why this is, we must understand what Berkeley thought of the Vulgar.

In those passages where Berkeley talks explicitly about the Vulgar, he characterizes them as being of an entirely different intellectual mold than the Learned. They are ignorant of philosophical speculation and uninterested in it. They are “simple & illiterate,” “unreflecting,” their minds “not yet debauched by learning.”206 Remarkably though, they are “for the most part easy and undisturbed”:

To them nothing that’s familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming *sceptics.*207

The Learned, on the other hand, are surprisingly vexed by skeptical worries. Although “it may with reason be expected, that those who have spent most time and pains in [philosophy] should […] be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men,” it is the philosopher herself who is “drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies,” and who ends up in a “forlorn scepticism.”208

This skeptical tendency of the Learned is said to stem from their recognition of the inherent limitations of our understanding. So, one might also say that the Vulgar are only out

---

206 See, respectively, Draft Introduction to *PHK* §10 (and *PHK* §1), *PHK* §55, and *PHK* §123.


208 Ibid.
of danger of becoming skeptics because they are completely ignorant of their own
limitations; the Learned know enough to know that they know very little. Berkeley gives
such sentiments short shrift:

We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men, than to
give them a strong desire for that knowledge, which He had placed quite out of their
reach. … Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all,
of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the
way to knowledge, are entirely owing to our selves. That we have first raised a dust,
and then complain, we cannot see. 209

It is not that the Learned know better than the Vulgar the limitations of human
knowledge. What the Learned claim to know of the limitations of knowledge are the
“doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions,” which result from the
acceptance by the Learned of a set of bad philosophical principles. 210

Berkeley doesn’t explicitly state the principles he has in mind here, at least not as
principles per se. It is clear though that foremost in his mind are what he calls the doctrine of
abstraction and problematic views on language. These are related. Berkeley credits a bad
view on how words achieve their meaning with giving rise to the thought that there must be
abstract ideas. It is said to follow from the supposition, “that the making use of words,
implies the having of general ideas … that men who use language are able to abstract or
genralize their ideas.” 211

[T]is thought that every name hath, or ought to have, one only precise and settled
signification, which inclines men to think there are certain abstract, determinate ideas,
which constitute the true and only immediate signification of each general name. 212

209 Ibid., 3.
210 Berkeley, PHK Intro. §4. I do not mean to imply, in opposing the Learned and the Vulgar, that the Vulgar
accept a set of good philosophical principles.
211 Berkeley, PHK Intro. §11.
212 Berkeley, PHK Intro. §18.
Berkeley has Locke in mind here as the proponent of such a view. It is beyond the scope of this paper to mediate the debate as to whether Berkeley is fair to Locke in thinking so. To be sure, there are passages in Locke *Essay* that strongly suggest the views that concern Berkeley here. Locke does say that “*all Words … signify nothing immediately, but the Ideas in the Mind of the Speaker,*” which can be read as suggesting that each word signifies some idea. And Locke does seem to say that the semantic power of individual words is derived directly from the content of the ideas each word stands for such that general terms must stand for ideas with generalized content.

… one word was made to mark a multitude of particular existences: Which advantageous use of Sounds was obtain’d by the difference of the Ideas they were made signs of. Those names becoming general, which are made to stand for general Ideas, and those remaining particular, where the Ideas they are used for are particular.

These are the principles—that each word signifies an idea, and that the semantic power of a word derives from the content of the idea it signifies—that Berkeley takes to lead philosophers to the doctrine that there are (indeed, must be) abstract ideas.

The doctrine of abstraction is the signature difference between the Learned and the vulgar, but not in perhaps the way one might expect. Whereas the Learned propound an erroneous view, it can’t clearly be said that the Vulgar accept and propound the correct one since it can’t clearly be said that the Vulgar—illiterate, unreflecting, not yet debauched by learning—have any views on the matter in the first place. Recall, Berkeley describes the Vulgar as utterly ignorant about and devoid of basic philosophical concepts in general, and

---


214 Locke, *Essay*, III.i.3.

215 Later Berkeley lists the (questionably Lockean) principle, “that language has no other end but the communicating our ideas,” as also contributing to the doctrine of abstraction. See PHK Intro. §19. See also Locke, *Essay*, III.x.23.
abstract ideas specifically. The “abstract Idea of Being or Existence” is unknown to them, and when they use the words ‘being’ or ‘existence,’ they do not use them to stand for abstract ideas. Consider too the following excerpts from Berkeley’s notebooks:

Abstract Ideas [are] only to be had amongst the Learned. The Vulgar never think they have any such, nor truly do they find any want of them. Genera & Species & abstract Ideas are terms unknown to them.

Existence, Extension etc are abstract i.e. no ideas. they are words unknown & useless to the Vulgar.

The Will & Volition are words not used by the Vulgar, the Learned are banter’d by their meaning abstract Ideas.

In light of these texts, it would be a stretch to say that the Vulgar, as Berkeley conceives of them, hold any views about abstract ideas; they simply know nothing of them.

The Vulgar’s ignorance of abstract ideas is related to another way in which they differ from the Learned, already hinted at in the quotes above: the Vulgar engage in different linguistic practices than the Learned, and don’t employ philosophical terms such as ‘being’, ‘extension’, and ‘will’. There is nothing surprising in Berkeley’s claim that the Vulgar lack abstract ideas; on his view genuinely abstract ideas are impossible. The difference is really that the Vulgar do without abstract ideas and do so in untroubled ignorance whereas the Learned “pretend” not only to have them, but pretend to need them for all manner of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Locke goes so far as to make “the having of general ideas … that which puts a perfect distinction betwixt man and brutes,” a claim so overstated

---


217 Ibid. §703.

218 Ibid. §772.

219 Ibid. §867.

220 See Berkeley, *PHK Intro.*, §10.
that Berkeley cannot resist quoting it in the Introduction to the Principles.  

The Vulgar’s untroubled use of language without abstract ideas is damning evidence against the purported Lockean view of language. According to Berkeley, language was created “by, and for the use of the Vulgar.” It is “accommodated to the common notions and prejudices of men,” “suited to the received opinions, which are not always the truest,” and “framed by the Vulgar, merely for conveniency and dispatch in the common actions of life, without any regard to speculation.” Because of this, “it is scarce possible to deliver the naked and precise truth, without great circumlocution, impropriety, and (to an unwary reader) seeming contradictions.” The reason is that the Vulgar use words in loose ways, not always making clear just what they mean to communicate. Writes Berkeley, “words as Used by the Vulgar are taken in some Latitude, their signification is confused.” None of this could be true, however, if it were true that each word must stand for some specific idea and that general terms signify abstract ideas. The Vulgar have no knowledge or want of abstract ideas and yet, not only do they use language, they created it.

Later we will see how Berkeley’s view on language developed in response to problems with (his understanding of) the Lockean view, and how it uniquely accounts for vulgar linguistic practices. For now, it is worth noting that while Berkeley is happy to admit that vulgar opinions are sometimes erroneous or often just not strictly true, he is equally happy to

---

221 See Berkeley, PHK Intro., §11
222 Berkeley, Dialogues, Works vol. 2, 182.
223 Berkeley, NTV §120; see also TVV §35.
224 Berkeley, PHK §52.
226 Berkeley, Notebooks, A §544.
allow the Vulgar to continue their ways of speaking. “I am not for disputing about the propriety, but the truth of the expression,” Berkeley writes. “If therefore you agree with me that we eat and drink, and are clad with the immediate objects of sense which cannot exist unperceived or without the mind: I shall readily grant it is more proper or conformable to custom, that they should be called things rather than ideas.”\(^{227}\) Most famously, there is this:

[I]t will … be demanded whether it does not seem absurd to take away natural causes, and ascribe every thing to the immediate operation of spirits? We must no longer say upon these [i.e., Lockean] principles that fire heats, or water cools, but that a spirit heats, and so forth. Would not a man be deservedly laughed at, who should talk after this manner? I answer, he would so; in such things we ought to think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar. They who … are convinced of the truth of the Copernican system, do nevertheless say the sun rises, the sun sets … : and if they affected a contrary style in common talk, it would without doubt appear very ridiculous. A little reflexion on what is here said will make it manifest, that the common use of language would receive no manner of alteration or disturbance from the admission of our tenets.\(^{228}\)

All of this—the Vulgar’s trouble-free ignorance of abstract ideas, their imprecise linguistic practices, and Berkeley’s concern to leave the latter undisturbed—is related to the Vulgar’s aforementioned resistance to skepticism.

The Vulgar’s resistance to skepticism is crucially important. It is clear that Berkeley takes the doctrine of abstraction to contribute to materialism, and it is clear that Berkeley sees materialism as giving rise to skeptical worries.\(^{229}\) In the prefaces to both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues*, Berkeley makes it clear that one of his chief aims is the defeat of skepticism, so if the Vulgar are naturally resistant to it, he has reason to value this. Their resistance is mostly explained by their ignorance of and lack of interest in philosophical speculation, but not

\(^{227}\) Berkeley, *PHK* §38.

\(^{228}\) Berkeley, *PHK* §51.

\(^{229}\) On the former point, see *PHK* §17. What the “most accurate philosophers” claim to signify by the words ‘material substance’ is, “the idea of being in general, together with the relative notion of its supporting accidents. The general idea of being appeareth to me the most abstract and incomprehensible of all.”” On materialism’s link to skepticism, see, for example, *PHK* §86 and §92.
entirely. We might imagine someone who was both uninterested in philosophy and yet constantly puzzled by the world around them. The Vulgar are not so puzzled, and this fact is due to their tendency to be “governed by the dictates of nature,” which leaves them “for the most part easy and undisturbed.” What does it mean to be “governed by the dictates of nature?” I contend it means just this: the Vulgar naturally and unreflectively believe that the perceived world is the real world; to the Vulgar, the sensed and sensible world is the real world, and not some copy of a yet-more-real world behind it.\footnote{I use the term belief here with some reservation. What exactly a belief is, for Berkeley, is quite unclear. Berkeley certainly did not hold anything like a propositional attitude account of belief, for on his theory of language a proposition could be nothing but an abstraction. Rather, like all thoughts in Berkeley’s system, beliefs have to reduce to ideas (or notions). But this means that all thoughts, at the end of the day, decompose into particular, determinate (i.e., non-abstract) perceptions. To say that the Vulgar believe that the perceived world is the real world is then to talk loosely when, more strictly, such terms as “the perceived world” and “the real world” are abstractions and have to be treated as general terms signifying some particular, non-abstract idea(s). More fruitful, perhaps, is to say that when the Vulgar perceive or think of a particular object—say an apple—they perceive or think of certain sensed qualities (a red color, a round shape, a sweet taste) and identify the object with those qualities—the apple is the red, round, sweet thing they see, feel, and taste. Importantly, this identification is the Vulgar’s natural default; they do not first consider and reject the alternative that the object is something distinct from the sensed qualities. Of course, even this is only a rough approximation; there is much work to be done to make clearer just what belief amounts to in Berkeley’s epistemology.}

This reading has strong textual support, especially in the Dialogues. In the Third Dialogue, after much haranguing over different versions of materialism, Berkeley, through Philonous, asks this:

\begin{quote}
Now give me leave to ask you, … [whether] it be not the wisest way to follow Nature, trust your senses, and laying aside all anxious thought about unknown natures or substances, admit with the vulgar those for real things, which are perceived by the senses?\footnote{Berkeley, Dialogues, Works, vol. 2, 246, my emphasis.}
\end{quote}

Most importantly, Berkeley echoes this refrain in his closing remarks of the Dialogues:

\begin{quote}
I do not pretend to be a setter-up of new notions. My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth, which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers: the former being of opinion, that those things they immediately perceive are the real things, and the latter, that the things immediately perceived, are ideas which exist only in the mind. Which two notions put together, do in effect constitute the substance of what I advance.\footnote{Ibid. 2:262, original emphasis.}
\end{quote}
It is the Vulgar’s unreflective belief that the perceived world is the real world, combined with their ignorance and lack of interest for speculation, that makes them so resistant to skepticism and therefore esteemed in Berkeley’s eyes.

We can see now that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense has very little to do with commonly held beliefs. Indeed, Berkeley only seems concerned with one such belief, and what’s more, his focus on this belief has nothing to do with its being commonly held as such. Rather, his concern to defend this belief stems from its anti-skeptical virtue. The Vulgar receive special attention from Berkeley because their untroubled ignorance and fidelity is evidence of the anti-skeptical virtue of following the dictates of nature. It is this natural and anti-skeptical belief that the Vulgar best exemplify that Berkeley seeks to defend with his immaterialism.\footnote{The anti-skeptical consequences of this belief also provide a clear answer to the question of why Berkeley cares to defend commonsense in the first place; because on this reading, commonsense is intrinsically anti-skeptical. As we will see later, interpretations that take Berkeley to be defending commonsense \textit{qua} commonly held opinions have trouble answering this question.}

4.2: \textbf{How is Berkeley Defending ‘Commonsense’?}

Berkeley’s defense of commonsense \textit{qua} commonsense is typically viewed as a philosophical defense of (some) commonly held beliefs. We have seen in what very limited sense this is true. We must now inquire into exactly \textit{how} this defense is supposed to be achieved. To do this, we need to look more closely at why Berkeley thought the Vulgar were in need of such a defense in the first place.

Berkeley sees materialism as a root cause of skepticism and Locke as representative of materialists. The notion that an unthinking, unsensed, and insensible something lay behind our experience and forever beyond our reach is philosophically poisonous to innocent minds.
Berkeley writes:

This which … hath been shewn to be a most groundless and absurd notion, is the very root of scepticism; for so long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows, they could not be certain that they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known, that the things which are perceived, are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind?234

Materialism amounts to exactly this type of separation between the real and the perceived. The problem is exacerbated by the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, a doctrine that many scholars think Berkeley misunderstands.235 Still, his misunderstanding is instructive for our purposes. According to (Berkeley’s version of) the Lockean materialist, a sensible object produces in us numerous ideas of sense. Some of these such as extension, figure, and solidity are said to be “patterns or images” of the object existing outside our minds. Other ideas of sense such as colors, sounds and tastes are “acknowledge[d] not to be the resemblances of any thing existing without the mind.”236 That is, on Berkeley’s understanding of materialism, the redness and sweetness perceived when eating an apple are not truly features of the apple itself.237

Berkeley thinks he has arguments to show that ideas of primary and secondary qualities are all on par. Locke holds that the primary qualities are those that are “utterly inseparable

---

234 Berkeley, PHK §86.

235 See, for example, Bennett (2001) 148: “Berkeley uses Locke’s doctrine about secondary qualities as a stick with which to beat materialism. This tactic depends entirely upon misunderstandings.” Margaret Wilson discusses a number of other evaluations of this sort in her excellent counterpoint (1999).

236 Berkeley, PHK §9.

237 I understand Locke’s views on the perception of material objects are much more nuanced than this and I don’t mean to impute such a crude view to him. However, it does appear that Berkeley’s take on Locke was at least this crude. Berkeley seems to misunderstand the entire business of primary and secondary qualities in Locke. Locke would likely respond that the word ‘red,’ for example, does apply to the apple insofar as the apple itself has the power to produce ideas of redness in us. Thus, ‘red’ applies equivocally to ideas of redness and to the idea of the power to produce such ideas. This is very much like a view Berkeley entertains about the ambiguous application of the word ‘body.’ See Notebooks B §§52, 282, 293, 293a.
from the Body, in what estate soever it be; such as in all the alterations and changes it suffers, … it constantly keeps.”

Divide a grain of wheat as much as you like, says Locke, you will never cause it to lose solidity, extension or figure. Berkeley’s response is essentially that you will never cause it to lose some color or other either. Now Berkeley is happy to accept Locke’s arguments that ideas of secondary qualities are mind-dependent. No one will assert that pain is a quality of fire, though they will say that warmth is. But “the Sensation of Warmth, does at a nearer approach, produce in us the far different Sensation of Pain.” So, the sensation of warmth must be as much dependent on our minds as the sensation of pain. Berkeley is quick to argue, though, that what goes for secondary qualities goes for primary qualities. Our perceptions of the size, shape and motion of an object are just as inter- and intra-personally variable as are our perceptions of flavors and colors. Thus, if secondary qualities are not resemblances of any thing existing without the mind, neither are primary qualities. Consequently, Berkeley takes Locke to be committed to the view that not only are apples not really red, sweet, or fragrant, they’re not really round or smooth either. Instead, apples and all other sensible objects are really just material substances, unknown and unknowable to us. “Upon the common principles of philosophers, we are not assured of the existence of things from their being perceived,” Berkeley writes. “And we are taught to distinguish their real nature from that which falls under our senses. Hence arise scepticism and paradoxes.”

As Berkeley understands it, materialism implies that the Vulgar are wrong to accept the perceived world as the real world. Just as bad is that on Locke’s view of language, the Vulgar

---


239 Ibid., II.viii.16.

are constantly speaking falsehoods and absurdities. Recall that as Berkeley understands it, Locke holds that words are meaningful exactly when they signify an idea; for every meaningful word there is a corresponding idea. Yet since the Lockean holds that the real apple is a thing entirely distinct from our sensory ideas of it, and since the corresponding view of language holds that each word signifies some idea, ordinary expressions such as “This apple is red” have to be given wild analyses. On the Lockean picture, the word ‘apple’ must signify some idea, and indeed, the same idea each and every time it is uttered. Either it signifies some sensory ideas, such as ideas of roundness, redness, or sweetness, or it signifies some other idea distinct from these. We have already seen that Berkeley thinks Locke is committed to the view that no idea of a sensible quality is an idea of the real apple. Thus, Berkeley takes Locke to be committed to the view that the apple itself is not really round, red, sweet, fragrant or possessing any sensible quality at all. But since the apple itself is neither round, nor red, nor sweet, nor fragrant, ideas of roundness, redness, etc. cannot serve to be the significatum of the name ‘apple.’ The name ‘apple,’ it seems, must signify the idea of the “real” apple, the unsensed, insensible, something-we-know-not-what that causes or supports our sensible ideas. That is, the name ‘apple’ must stand for an abstract idea of material substance that Berkeley so abhors. For the Vulgar to then say that apples are red, on Berkeley’s understanding of the Lockean picture, is for them to predicate a sensible quality to a substance that has no sensible qualities whatsoever.

I have argued that Berkeley regards the Vulgar as being naturally resistant to skepticism; resistant, but not immune. It is the “general opinion of the world … that the end of speculation be practice, or the improvement and regulation of our lives and actions.”241 So, one would expect that those who are most involved in philosophical inquiry will know better

---

241 Ibid.
than those who are not and serve as a good examples for those not as well educated. Yet it is the philosophers who are most prone to skepticism, and due to their privileged status, this is especially dangerous to the otherwise credulous, faithful Vulgar. Materialist philosophers are, as it were, vectors of a dangerous intellectual disease.

One might wonder, though, how exactly the Vulgar are threatened by bad philosophy if Berkeley thinks the Vulgar have nothing to do with speculation.242 Berkeley does say, after all, that the Vulgar are, “out of all danger of becoming sceptics.”243 If this is true, why would they need or benefit from Berkeley’s defensive efforts? If materialists are the vectors of an intellectual disease, how is this potentially transmitted to the Vulgar? And, if Berkeley is primarily interested in defending the Vulgar, how is this accomplished by writing works addressed to the Learned?

These are interesting issues, some of which it seems Berkeley simply did not write clearly about. It is clear that Berkeley thought there was some method of transmission. Both the Principles and the Three Dialogues open with suggestive comparisons of the Vulgar and the Learned.244 In the Dialogues, he ramps up this suggestion into an explicit worry about the effects that people who “pretended either to believe nothing at all, or to believe the most extravagant things in the world” have on society writ large.

“This however might be borne, if their paradoxes and scepticism did not draw after them some consequences of general disadvantage to mankind. But the mischief lieth here; that when men of less leisure see them who are supposed to have spent their whole time in the pursuits of knowledge, professing an entire ignorance of all things, or advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and commonly received

242 My thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

243 Berkeley, PHK Intro., §1.

244 See Berkeley, PHK Intro., §1 and Dialogues, Works vol. 2, 171.
principles, they will be tempted to entertain suspicions concerning the most important truths, which they had hitherto held sacred and unquestionable.”

This passage shows two things. First, it shows that Berkeley thinks that there is some method by which these dangerous beliefs can spread to “men of less leisure.” Whether this is a result of the Vulgar passively taking the word of their supposed intellectual betters or of trying to more actively emulate the Learned is unclear. Second, this passage also shows that Berkeley is concerned about these kinds of beliefs because of the potential effects on those of less leisure, namely tempting them to entertain suspicions about the most important truths. Were it not for the “consequences of general disadvantage to mankind,” these kinds of extravagant opinions “might be borne.”

This passage also helps explain why, though his larger aim is to prevent the corruption of the Vulgar, they are not his intended audience. Berkeley writes in the Preface to the Dialogues that he aims to convince skeptics and infidels. Elsewhere he speaks of “recalling” or “reducing” men to commonsense. To be sure, Berkeley is writing to the Learned, his colleagues in the schools and the church. They are the ones who have already taken steps away from the “high-road of plain, common sense”, and they are who Berkeley hopes to recall from their confusion. But they are also his opponents, and his attitude toward them is


246 One might wonder whether by “men of less leisure” Berkeley really means the Vulgar or some subset of the Learned. This passage is a very close parallel of PHK Intro. §1. There, Berkeley is explicitly comparing the Vulgar to the Learned. In light of the similarities of the two passages, I think it is a safe assumption that he is referring to the Vulgar here too.

247 There might be a variety of routes of transmission. Berkeley, of course, well knows the power of the pulpit, so perhaps he worries about the effects of skepticism on the priestly class, and thereby on their congregants. Perhaps he was concerned about skeptical public intellectuals such as the titular character of Alciphron. Precisely how Berkeley thinks this transmission happens is, for our purposes, less important than that he thinks it happens and what he thinks of the consequences of its happening.


primarily antagonistic. The reason for this is suggested by the passage above; his opponents’ views might be tolerated were it not for the effects they have in corrupting the Vulgar in those matters of greatest importance.250

We are now in a position to see that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is quite different than previously thought. Standard interpretations take Berkeley to be defending commonsense by building a metaphysical system that somehow shows how commonly held beliefs are either true or at least justifiable. Berkeley’s project is alleged to be constructive—to build a better metaphysics and epistemology, one that, as Bennett says, “assures plain folk of the existence of the things that they believe in.”251 Or, take Robert Muchlmann’s characterization: “[Berkeley] sees his main task to be that of vouchsafing common-sense beliefs and he takes it as obvious that we are aware both of our selves and of other real things, of rivers, trees, mountains, and so on.”252

This assumption about the structure of Berkeley’s defense of commonsense—that it involves giving positive philosophical support for commonsense beliefs—is as wrong as it is pervasive. I wrote earlier that the case for reading Berkeley as an apologist for commonsense beliefs is overstated. Nothing shows this more than a remarkably overlooked fact about Berkeley’s texts—Berkeley never uses the word “defend” or any of its cognates in reference to commonsense or commonly held opinions.253 What he does write is that he aims to

---

250 That these most important matters are largely religious is clear from the closing of the *Principles*. Berkeley takes himself to have shown, “the falseness or vanity of those barren speculations, which make the chief employment of learned men,” a not-insignificant step in showing that, “what deserves the first place in our studies, is the consideration of *God*, and our *duty*; which to promote … was the main drift and design of my labours[.].” See *PHK* §156.


252 Muchlmann (1992) 8, my emphasis.

253 To be sure, he was aware of and used the term to mean a positive case for some viewpoint, having authored *A Defence of Free-Thinking in Mathematics*. 
vindicate commonsense, and the difference, though subtle, is crucial. Whereas, in philosophical contexts, ‘defend’ is often used to denote a kind of positive justificatory act—to argue for, to maintain, support, or prove—, to vindicate is to clear from blame or accusation—to protect from, to exculpate, exonerate, or acquit.\(^{254}\)

Consider another context in which defenses are mounted, namely a legal context. An attorney might defend her client in one of two very different ways. In one case, she might bring witnesses who will vouch for her client’s virtuous character, or provide evidence that her client’s actions were justified. In another case, she might grant that her client is a dirty rotten scoundrel, previously guilty of dozens of crimes. And yet she still might (we would say) defend her client by attacking the prosecution’s case, undercutting their arguments, challenging the veracity and motivation of prosecution witnesses, etc. In both cases, what the attorney mounts is unambiguously a defense, but the strategy is completely different.

Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is a defense of this second sort, better styled a vindication than an apology, for he recognizes that there is very little to apologize for among commonly held beliefs. However, the central, anti-skeptical tenet of the Vulgar—that the perceived world is the real world—is both correct and important, and it is threatened by the spread of bad philosophy. Berkeley aims to prevent the corruption of the Vulgar by attacking and destroying that which threatens them. Berkeley himself describes his project this way by listing those propositions he is attacking rather than those he is embracing:

That the qualities we perceive, are not on the objects: that we must not believe our senses: that we know nothing of the real nature of things, and can never be assured even of their existence: that colours and sounds are nothing but certain unknown figures and motions: that motions are in themselves neither swift nor slow: that there

\(^{254}\) Of course, ‘defend’ also has this other exculpatory sense. That commentators consistently view Berkeley’s defense of commonsense as a positive project is perhaps just as surprising as the ubiquity of the use of the term ‘defense’ itself. I continue to use the term only because it is already so well established in the secondary literature.
are in bodies absolute extension, without any particular magnitude or figure: that a thing stupid, thoughtless and inactive, operates on a spirit: that the least particle of a body, contains innumerable extended parts. These are the novelties, these are the strange notions which shock the genuine uncorrupted judgment of all mankind; and being once admitted, embarrass [i.e., obstruct or hamper] the mind with endless doubts and difficulties. And it is against these and the like innovations, I endeavor to vindicate common sense.255

That Berkeley’s strategy is to attack a threat rather than to offer a defense-cum-apology is highlighted by his putting the word ‘defense’ (‘defence’) in Hylas’s mouth. Thus, Hylas:

“\[quote\]
The reality of things cannot be maintained without supposing the existence of matter. And is not this, think you, a good reason why I should be earnest in its defence?\[\]”256

“I acknowledge you have proved that matter is impossible; nor do I see what more can be said in defence of it.”257

“I agree with you. Material substance was no more than an hypothesis, and a false and groundless one too. I will no longer spend my breath in defence of it.”258

Here then is the full shape of Berkeley’s defense of commonsense. Berkeley is indeed a defender of commonsense insofar as he defends that most basic belief of the Vulgar; that the world perceived immediately is the real world. And his defense of commonsense is a defense insofar as he is protecting this belief by attacking what he sees as the sharp point of abstract ideas in the hands of materialist philosophers who would, without resistance, corrupt the easy and undisturbed life of a group otherwise “out of all danger of becoming sceptics.”259 But it is not, as others have thought, intended to be a defense in the sense of an

255 Berkeley, Dialogues, Works vol. 2,244, emphasis mine.

256 Ibid., 224.

257 Ibid., 226.

258 Ibid., 229.

259 Berkeley, PHK Intro §1. By now it should be clear that this is an overstatement, but a type of overstatement to which Berkeley is prone. The Vulgar are not out of all danger, but nor does Berkeley side in all things with the mob.
apology for commonsense beliefs. Berkeley is not out to show that every vulgar opinion is true, or even justified—he is not writing for them, he is writing on behalf of them. His is not a project of divining the mind of the common person so that he can build up a ‘metaphysics for the mob.’ To Berkeley, the mob has no need of a metaphysics. The Vulgar don’t need to be convinced not to be skeptics—only people with skeptical tendencies need convincing. To Berkeley, the Vulgar are already as far from being skeptics and atheists as they will ever be. It is his intention to make sure they stay that way, and his philosophy serves as a defense—not as a shield, but as a weapon—against the most significant threat to their normal credulity and faith.

To see the virtues of this account in their full light, it will be instructive to compare it to some competing interpretations. I turn now to an examination of these rival accounts. I choose these two accounts because, though remarkably different from each other, they each take seriously Berkeley’s claims to be in some way defending commonsense.

### 4.3: Pappas’ Propositional Account

One of the most well developed competing accounts is George Pappas’. He takes Berkeley’s claims of being both in agreement with and a defender of commonsense as more than merely rhetorical, though he attributes to them less importance than Berkeley seems to indicate. In Pappas’ view, the extent to which Berkeley is in agreement with commonsense plays a relatively minor role for him, except insofar as this may count as a tiebreaker between

---

260 This is the title of Roberts’ book. We will soon see that Roberts overstates the importance of Berkeley’s positive metaphysics to the defense of commonsense.

261 Pappas has written a number of pieces on commonsense. I will restrict my comments to his most recent discussion of the issue his (2000).
Berkeley’s views and those of his opponents (which presumably fare worse by this measure).\textsuperscript{262}

Pappas identifies three ways Berkeley characterizes commonsense; as a disposition for forming beliefs, as a group of people of a certain type, and as a list of propositions thought to be commonsensical.\textsuperscript{263} Pappas focuses only on the third sense—commonsense as a set of propositions. Berkeley’s defense of commonsense, then, is primarily a defense of these propositions. Pappas notes, however, that Berkeley self-consciously rejects some of the propositions he (Pappas) lists as commonsensical.\textsuperscript{264} This raises three issues. The first is how to determine which propositions are commonsensical, and of these, which Berkeley defends. The second concerns how to understand Berkeley’s defense of only some of these commonsensical propositions alongside his claims to be in accord with commonsense \textit{simpliciter}. The third concerns the question of why, in light of this uneven attitude toward commonsensical propositions, Berkeley is concerned to defend commonsense at all in the first place.

As already mentioned, Pappas downplays the overall importance to Berkeley of according with commonsense. So, as regards this second issue, it would be enough to say that Berkeley is aligned with commonsense \textit{to a greater degree} by defending more commonsensical propositions than can his opponents. This, though, brings us back to the first issue; how to delineate which propositions are commonsensical and, of these, which Berkeley defends. For as Pappas notes, if there are indefinitely many commonsensical propositions, Berkeley’s ability to defend more of these than can his opponents would count


\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., 210–1.

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 12–3, 209.
little in his favor if, for example, his opponents were more in line than him with regard to propositions that are more fundamental. This in turn raises the specter of the third question: even if Berkeley can claim to be more in line with commonsense than his opponents, why does he this count as an advantage of his views?

To generate both the metric by which Berkeley’s alignment with commonsense is to be judged and to explain why agreement with commonsense should be any mark in Berkeley’s favor, Pappas constructs a set of propositions which he takes to be “of most concern to Berkeley.” To do this, he begins with the class of all commonsensical propositions (C-propositions). C-proposition are of two types. Ordinary C-propositions are those “that the typical person of common sense does believe, a proposition that the person would assent to if queried”; reflective C-propositions are those “a typical common sense person would believe upon some unbiased reflection on the matter.” Of the propositions in each of these two sub-classes, some are basic in that “belief in any other proposition in the larger [sub-class] presupposes belief in one or more [of these].” So there are classes of basic, ordinary C-propositions and basic, reflective C-propositions, of which special consideration is given to the latter group on account of their reflective status. Having identified a number


266 Ibid., 217. Perhaps it is more accurate to call it a reconstruction. For Pappas identifies, from select quotations, a number of propositions he takes Berkeley to be defending. The procedure he then constructs (which I lay out here) is an attempt to give an account of why those propositions in particular appear to matter to Berkeley, and they matter (Pappas conjectures) because they can be singled out through this procedure.

267 Ibid. 214. There is a tension in Pappas’ account on this matter. In distinguishing ordinary from reflective C-propositions, he claims that the class of reflective C-propositions includes propositions not also included in the class of ordinary C-propositions; there are some C-propositions that a typical person of commonsense would believe upon reflection that they would not assent to if queried prior to reflection. That is, there are reflective C-propositions that are not actually believed (and might even be denied) by some typical people of commonsense, even if only because they have not appropriately reflected upon them. This would not be a problem save for Pappas’ claim that the overall class of C-propositions is “made up of those propositions believed by the whole of mankind, by every person of common sense wherever that person may be found.” (Ibid., 216, my emphasis).

268 Ibid. 216.
of propositions of special concern to Berkeley, Pappas conjectures that they are of special concern precisely because they fall in the group of basic, reflective C-propositions. These propositions form the set C, and there are eleven of them.\(^{269}\) They are as follows:

C1. There are ordinary (macro) physical objects.

C2. All (macro) physical objects and at least some of their qualities exist independently of and are generally unaffected by perceptions.

C3. Every macro physical object has the sensible qualities it is typically perceived to have.

C4. No macro physical object has phenomenal individuals (ideas, sensa) as constituents.

C5. Macro physical objects and some of their qualities are typically immediately perceived.

C6. Macro physical objects are publicly perceivable.

C7. When macro physical objects are immediately perceived, they are typically immediately perceived as they are.

C8. It is false that in every perceptual experience, at least one phenomenal individual (ideas, sensa) is immediately perceived.

C9. Human cognizers typically gain immediate, non-inferential perceptual knowledge of macro physical objects.

C10. Human cognizers typically gain certain perceptual knowledge of macro physical objects.

C11. There is genuine causation between events in the physical world.

On Pappas’ interpretation, Berkeley accepts and defends seven of these elements, rejecting C2, C4, C8, and C11.\(^ {270}\) In Berkeley’s view, however, his materialist opponents can

\(^{269}\) Pappas counts only ten propositions in set C: “the seven statements of [Common Sense Realism (CSR)] which Berkeley accepts … the two elements from CSR that Berkeley rejects,” and, “the statement that there is genuine causation between events in the physical world.” The two rejected elements of CSR are numbers 2 and 4 on my list. Pappas counts my numbers 9 and 10 as the two constituents of Epistemic Direct Realism (EDR), which he says Berkeley wholly accepts. (See Ibid., chapter 7.) I think Pappas is then counting the two elements of EDR together as a single statement of CSR, which would explain why we reach different counts of the members of set C.
only manage to fully accommodate five of the elements of set C, and a sixth, but only partially. So, Berkeley’s claims to be a defender of commonsense are true, but only to the extent that his philosophical system is consistent with more of the basic propositions a typical person of common sense would accept upon reflection than are the systems of his opponents. And though limited in scope, this confers a small measure of philosophical advantage to Berkeley because these propositions are so basic to the worldview of the commonsense person.

4.4: Problems for Pappas

For Pappas, Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is essentially a philosophical defense of commonsense propositions. By these, he means propositions which a typical person of commonsense either does believe or would come to believe upon some reflection. Berkeley can be said to defend these propositions (presumably) just in case they are consistent with his positive epistemological and metaphysical theses. Of purported special concern are the members of set C; basic, reflective C-propositions.

Pappas’ account rests on a number of assumptions: (a) that Berkeley “defends”—i.e., argues for—the select members of C; (b) that he identifies the select members of C as basic, reflective, and commonsensical; (c) that he defends the select members of C because of their basic, reflective, commonsensical status; and (d) that his defense of commonsense consists in

---

270 Ibid., 227.

271 Ibid., 228–32.

272 It might seem odd to say that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense involves merely being consistent with the truth of the members of set C. Consistency is fairly low hurdle to jump. More interesting would be if Berkeley’s positive theses entailed members of set C. In some cases (C3, perhaps), this seems to be true. But it is not obviously true (and arguably false) that others are entailed by any core Berkeleian thesis. Since Pappas does not say explicitly whether Berkeley’s defense of these propositions amounts to showing that they are entailed by his views, I will not attribute a view that strong to him.
his arguments for commonsensical propositions, among them the select members of C. I think all of these are false.

I will only briefly address (a). With respect to (a), there is fervent debate over whether Berkeley defends even these propositions. For example, the immediate perception of sensible objects (and therefore C7) is challenged by Margaret Atherton, Marc Hight, and George Pitcher, each for different reasons.273 I agree with Pappas on the issue of immediate perception, but for related reasons, I do not think that Berkeley thinks sensible objects are, very strictly speaking, publicly perceivable (C6). Let us simply grant (a).

Pappas’ account is ultimately driven by assumption (d). Unless one thinks that the defense of commonsense consists in arguments for commonsensical propositions, one needn’t be concerned with precisely which commonsensical propositions Berkeley defends, why he ignores others, and how he decides which propositions to defend and which to ignore. An account that assumes (d), however, must deal with each of these issues. Pappas addresses each of these, though his account, I think, ultimately proves to be unsuccessful.

As Pappas notes, there are indefinitely many commonsensical propositions, both ordinary and reflective. Among these are the members of C, but it is also presumably commonsensical (for many of Berkeley’s contemporaries) that the Earth does not move. So if one thinks Berkeley is defending commonsensical propositions, one must explain why he chooses to defend only some of them (Pappas’ set C) and not others (that the Earth does not move), why the former but not the latter is of special importance to Berkeley. Pappas’ conjecture is that it is “because each of the [members of C] is a reflective, settled, universally believed and basic C-proposition, that agreement with that small group of propositions may

---

273 See Atherton (2008a) and (2008b); Hight (2007); and Pitcher (1986).
count as evidence for a philosophical theory. Recall also that the elements of set C are included therein because each is a basic, reflective C-proposition. Since “that the Earth does not move” is not a basic, reflective C-proposition, it is not included in set C and is, therefore, not worthy of defense. On Pappas’ view then, the questions of which commonsensical propositions Berkeley singles out for defense and why he ignores others are answered by the fact that the members of C are basic and reflective. And, since C can be generated by an accounting of those reflective C-propositions which are most basic, settled and universal, Pappas appears to have resources to answer how Berkeley decides which propositions to defend and which to ignore.

In fact, however, Pappas’ account fails adequately to answer any of these questions. If the question is why Berkeley defends some member of C and not the common view that the Earth does not move, Pappas might indeed point to the basic, reflective nature of the former as the reason for its special consideration. But Pappas’ account cannot explain why Berkeley chooses to defend only some members of set C and not all of them. As far as commonsense is concerned, there is as much to be said in favor of the members of set C that Berkeley rejects as there is for the members that he defends; each of the members are properly basic, settled, universally accepted reflective commonsense propositions. What we still lack is an explanation of why Berkeley defends only some of these select C-propositions. Troublingly for Pappas, the answer to this question cannot appeal to their status as basic, reflective, or commonsensical. That is, it cannot be that Berkeley defends his preferred members of set C because they are commonsensical since, from the viewpoint of commonsense, there is no reason to prefer any member(s) of C over any other. Membership in C is insufficient to explain fully why Berkeley purportedly gives some C-propositions special consideration and

ignores others. Without an explanation of why he treats commonsense propositions unevenly, we cannot answer how Berkeley discriminates between those he accepts and those he rejects. And without some principled account of this discrimination, we must conclude that Berkeley’s decision to defend only some commonsense propositions—if we are even able to determine which ones—is ultimately ad hoc.

4.5: Roberts’ Religious Image

Recently, John Russell Roberts has produced a novel account of the relationship between Berkeley’s philosophy and commonsense. On Roberts’ account, “the fundamental link between Berkeley’s philosophy and common sense ultimately runs through his account of spirits.” Berkeley defends commonsense insofar as his metaphysics is commensurate with the metaphysical viewpoint of the mob.

Roberts borrows heavily from the work of Wilfrid Sellars, particularly his notions of the contrasting ‘scientific’ and ‘manifest images’ of the world. These two images are conceptual frameworks through which humans conceive of the world and their role in it. Quoting Roberts:

‘[T]he manifest image’ has come to name our view of the world as consisting of the sorts of items with which we meet in sense perception. [T]he ontology of the manifest image is, as we might put it, ontologically permissive. Reality consists of a variety of different kinds of entities, everything from “cabbages to kings.” … This image of the world then competes with ‘the scientific image’ of man-in-the-world, and vice versa. The latter is our picture of reality as consisting, at most, of only a few kinds of things, and these things are the postulated entities of physical theory.

---

275 Roberts (2007) xvii. See also ibid., xx, 36, 128–9.

276 Roberts (2007) 125. See also Sellars (1963). Interestingly, what Sellars and Roberts call images of the world are perhaps best thought of as sets of commonsense propositions of the type that concerns Pappas. My thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this connection.
Importantly, the basic entities of the scientific image are unimaginable because they are *imperceptible.*\(^{277}\)

The world as seen in the manifest image is the world as we perceive it; “in the manifest image, objects are colored or clear, heavy or light, coarse or smooth, etc.”\(^{278}\) The world of the scientific image is the world as science says it *really* is; “[w]ithin the scientific, it does not even make sense to think of its basic objects as colored or clear, or smelly or fragrant, as coarse or soft, bitter or sweet, etc.”\(^{279}\)

Both images are still images of how the world is and thereby contain conceptions of what things are real, and what things are not. The manifest image is perhaps ontologically permissive, but it is still true that there are no such things as unicorns, say. What is important for Roberts’ account is that the manifest image is a person-based ontology—persons are its most basic entities. For the manifest image is itself derived from an ancestral image—the ‘original image.’ In the original image, *all* entities are persons: “persons are not conceived as, in some sense, consisting of two things: a visible body and an invisible soul. Rather, being a river or a tree is a *way of being a person.*”\(^{280}\) The manifest image departs from the original image by a process of depersonalization, of “pruning” or “truncating” the concept of person.\(^{281}\) Nonetheless, in the manifest image, persons are fundamental.

This conceptual commitment to the way the world is (and isn’t) within the manifest image gives sense to the claim that the mob has its own kind of metaphysics. The manifest image is the metaphysical view of commonsense, and it is a metaphysics in which persons

\(^{277}\) Roberts (2007) 125–6, original emphasis.

\(^{278}\) Ibid. 126.

\(^{279}\) Ibid.

\(^{280}\) Ibid., 127. See also Sellars (1963) 10.

\(^{281}\) Ibid. 130. See also Sellars (1963) 12–14.
are fundamental. For Roberts, this is where Berkeley’s metaphysics meets up with commonsense, for Berkeley too countenances a metaphysics in which persons are fundamental.  

Of course, for Berkeley, persons are more properly called spirits, and this requires us to stop short of saying that Berkeley is a philosopher of the manifest image. Rather, he is a defender of what Roberts coins the ‘religious image’. The religious image, like the manifest image, is derived from the original image and so shares a common core with commonsense. It differs, though, in that it is both spirit-based and “irreducibly supernatural.” Roberts gives a lengthy account of the development of the religious image from Plato through Augustine to Descartes and Malebranche which I will not review. For our purposes, the crucial shift from original image to manifest image to religious image involves a shift from the adult human to God as the paradigm of the primary category of being. This shift leads to the conception of the natural world as, “distinct from, and fully dependent upon, the existence of the non-natural, i.e., the spiritual.”

The religious image then views man-in-the-world as a spiritual creature made in the image of the paradigm of the primary category of being, God. This, of course, should sound very much like the Berkeleian view of the world. But, Roberts contends, this is also the image of Berkeley’s audience. Berkeley’s metaphysics is then a defense of commonsense to the extent that it is (or is nearly) the metaphysics of commonsense itself.

---

282 There is a potential difficulty for Roberts’ view here, since it can be seen to sit uncomfortably with Berkeley’s reservations about the concept ‘person’. See, for example, Notebooks A §713. My thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this point.

283 Roberts (2007) 129.

284 Ibid., 129–30.

285 In his comments on an earlier version of this paper presented at the American Philosophical Association’s Pacific Division meeting, Roberts took issue with my treatment of his view as being structurally analogous to
4.6: RESPONSE TO ROBERTS

Roberts’ view faces difficulties analogous to those raised against Pappas. According to Roberts, “Idealism and the beliefs of ordinary folk … make their primary point of contact in theism.” He writes, “Certainly, the great bulk of the ‘vulgar’ are professing monotheists. This is the mob for which Berkeley speaks.” Berkeley’s defense of commonsense then is his positive metaphysics insofar as it is essentially monotheistic; the defense of commonsense consists in the arguments for the positive metaphysics.

Granted, Berkeley’s mob probably is largely monotheistic. That Berkeley’s metaphysics is also monotheistic is a point of contact with popular opinion, and one Berkeley would be happy about. However, identifying commonsense with monotheism simply does not fit with the texts. The passages where Berkeley invokes commonsense almost all involve his criticisms of materialism and its paradoxical, skeptical consequences. It is hard to see how simply arguing for monotheism by itself counts against materialism and skepticism, since the materialists foremost in Berkeley’s mind—notably Locke and Descartes—were each monotheists.

Moreover, Roberts’ account does not serve to explain why Berkeley’s defense of commonsense is limited only to a defense of monotheism. Any interpretation that sees

---

Pappas’. In particular, he highlighted what he calls Berkeley’s deflationary strategy with respect to abstract ideas and the importance to Berkeley of clearing the way of bad philosophy, aspects of his view that I ignore herein. I accept much of what Roberts says on these other issues; his deflationary account of Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism is indeed quite consonant with my own. However, these other parts of Roberts’ account do not seem (to me) to be clearly linked with his interpretation of Berkeley’s defense of commonsense as a defense of the religious image. The defense of the religious image remains over and above the critical work of the anti-abstractionism. Insofar as Roberts holds that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense consists in (some arguments for) a positive metaphysical view of the world embraced universally by the Vulgar, I maintain that his view is not structurally different than Pappas’.


287 Ibid. 143.
Berkeley as arguing for some popular opinions must also explain why he doesn’t argue for some others. It might be true that the great bulk of the Vulgar believe that the Earth does not move. What Roberts’ view does not explain is why the belief in God is worth defending from the point of commonsense and not the belief that the Earth does not move. It seems, in fact, that Roberts is aware of this problem and is prepared to accept that the defense of commonsense as he construes it is even more limited than it appears at first glance.

[I]t will now be pointed out that this account only lines up Berkeley’s metaphysics with common sense insofar as the religious image itself is in line with common sense. … But if […] the religious image is denied the status of common sense, then Berkeley would readily reject the notion that his work is a defense of, or even consistent with, common sense. Berkeley is only interested in defending his view as common sense insofar as a commitment to a traditional Judeo-Christian monotheism is considered a part of common sense.288

This is just to admit that, on Roberts’ view, Berkeley’s so-called defense of commonsense is merely so-called: it is actually only a defense of a belief in monotheism, a belief which Berkeley antecedently accepts and which then only gets labeled ‘commonsensical’. Roberts’ view is then not significantly different from that of Yandell: for Berkeley, “according with commonsense” turns out to mean just “in agreement with me.”289

This is, as I said at the outset, a disappointing verdict.

4.7: LETTING BERKELEY BE BERKELEY

The assumption that both Pappas and Roberts share—that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense consists in his arguments for (some) commonsensical beliefs—is the culprit. Berkeley’s total allegiance to commonsense cannot be maintained, and any account that sees him as offering an apology for only some selected commonsense views will be strained to

288 Ibid. 142, my emphasis.

explain his mostly negative attitude toward common opinion writ large. Berkeley’s texts do not furnish us with the materials for such an explanation. We must either jettison the assumption that Berkeley is defending common opinions by way of apology or accept that his defense of commonsense is either unprincipled or disingenuous. As we have seen though, we can make sense of the defense of commonsense without making Berkeley out to be an apologist for vulgar opinions.

At the beginning, I set forth three criteria that any interpretation of Berkeley’s defense of commonsense should meet: (1) it should make clear the importance to Berkeley of commonsense; (2) it should make clear in what way Berkeley’s philosophy relates to commonsense; and (3) it should make fully credible Berkeley’s claims to have met with some success in his defense. This account meets all three criteria. No one is puzzled by Berkeley’s concern to oppose skepticism. So, if his defense of commonsense just is an attack on what he sees as the skeptical threats facing the naturally credulous vulgar, the importance of this project to him is transparent. It is clear how his philosophy relates to the defense of commonsense. The threat to the Vulgar is the doctrine of abstraction and the materialism and representative realism to which it gives rise. Berkeley’s attack on these views—his anti-abstractionism and immaterialism—is central to his larger Idealism. So, the defense of commonsense is likewise central to his philosophy. We might not be prepared to accept either his anti-abstractionism or his immaterialism. But, we can easily see how Berkeley—who found his own philosophy convincing—could have reasonably thought that it succeeded in defending commonsense. For, if the defense of commonsense is just the anti-abstractionism and immaterialism, we should take as seriously his claims to have successfully defended commonsense as we do his anti-abstractionism and immaterialism.
One important virtue of the present interpretation is that it allows us to see in what ways each of the different extant accounts of the defense of commonsense gets something right. We can now see that Bennett is, in a way, exactly right that Berkeley cared little for rescuing the plain person’s beliefs. Though we should not go on to conclude from this that Berkeley had no interest in defending what he could fairly describe as commonsense. Pappas is right to take Berkeley at his word when he writes of defending commonsense, and right that Berkeley does defend some members of the set C. His error lies in thinking that Berkeley’s defense consists only in his defense of those members of set C. We can see why one might read Berkeley’s attitude toward the Vulgar as “Janus-faced”, as Ian Tipton does, since we can now see that it’s true both that Berkeley defends “commonsense” and that he regards popular opinion with derision. Roberts is right to think that the structure of Berkeley’s metaphysics is important insofar as it is a rejection of any form of representative realism that might lead to skepticism. His error lies in assuming that Berkeley’s metaphysics is intended for the use of the Vulgar instead of, shall we say, merely on behalf of them.

More importantly, by properly recognizing the scope and strategy of Berkeley’s defense of commonsense, we can see that it is largely independent of his positive metaphysical theses. This means that interpretations of his metaphysics need not answer to what we, or Berkeley, think of as commonly held beliefs. Yet, as we have seen, this is just what we find in the most popular interpretations. This is to put the interpretive cart before the textual horse. Determining whether Berkeley’s philosophy counts as a defense of commonsense requires first determining what his philosophy is, and independently, what is commonsense (for Berkeley). This task is greatly complicated if one’s interpretation of the philosophy is itself constrained by a prefabricated account of what commonsense is and how Berkeley must go about defending it. My hope is that this essay removes the temptation to thus constrain
interpretations of Berkeley’s philosophy. If the best available interpretation of the text is one on which, for example, Berkeley denies that ideas and collections of them are publicly perceived, then we should accept it as such regardless of whether it conflicts with what one supposes “commonsense” to say. Once we recognize that Berkeley’s defense of commonsense doesn’t require his philosophy to be for the common person, we can allow ourselves to see Berkeley for who he really is rather than for who we think he needs to be.
REFERENCES


Chomsky, Noam.


