

On Language, Perception and Things in
Berkeley's Ontology

B/B+

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Key to references

All quotations used in this paper have been taken from Berkeley's Philosophical Works, edited by M.R. Ayers (London and Totowa, N.J.: Dent, Roman and Littlefield, 1980). I have adopted the following scheme of abbreviation:

NTV New Theory of Vision

PHK Principles of Human Knowledge

DHP Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous

TVV Theory of Vision Vindicated

The aim of this paper is to investigate what Berkeley means by a thing. Instead of plunging into Berkeley's general ontology of things, I shall confine my attention to Berkeley's distinction between things as naively perceived and things as philosophically perceived. This distinction will be seen to rest on different uses of language in perception. The extent to which, for Berkeley, one's use of language and one's mode of perceiving condition the being of things will be the major focal point of my investigation.

In a passage of fundamental importance for understanding Berkeley's notion of a thing, he says that

There hath been a long and close connexion in our minds between the ideas of sight and touch. Hence they are considered as one thing; which prejudice suiteth well enough with the purposes of life; and language is suited to this prejudice. {The work of science and speculation} is to unravel our prejudices and mistakes, untwisting the closest connexions, distinguishing things that are different, instead of confused or perplexed, giving us distinct views, gradually correcting our judgment, and reducing it to a philosophical exactness. And, as this is the work of time, and done by degrees, it is extremely difficult, if at all possible, to escape the snares of popular language, and the being betrayed thereby to say things strictly speaking neither true nor consistent. This makes thought and candour more especially necessary in the reader. For, language being accommodated to the praenotions of men and the use of life, it is difficult to express therein the precise truth of things, which is so distant from their use, and so contrary to our praenotions. (TVV, 35, p. 240)

In this passage, language is presented as the source or cause of false notions. The language response is contrasted with the truth of things.

Berkeley seems to be arguing that the precise truth of things, as the philosopher knows or ought to know it, is remote from the use of things in the ordinary affairs of the plain man.

But Berkeley often speaks as if this distance can be lessened from either the standpoint of the philosopher or that of the plain man. At its maximum, the gap between the use and the truth of things reaches from the thing for the plain man who communicates with it in ordinary experience or wholly unphilosophically, to the thing for the philosopher who understands it both in its truth and in its place in ordinary experience. The way in which the distance between the use and the truth of things can be minimized is best put in terms of the use of language in perception.

(The perception of things adequate to the ordinary conduct of the plain man rests on a prejudiced use of language, either [the ordinary language of words] or [the "natural" languages of vision and hearing].)

The perception of things adequate to their truth depends on exposing this prejudice and guarding one's

thought against it as much as possible. That is, the use of things in ordinary life rests on a use of language considered inadequate for gaining philosophical or scientific knowledge of

them. Put another way, effective communication with things in ordinary life depends on a fundamental error, and on not

recognizing it as such, while real progress in the philosophical knowledge of things depends on avoiding this very error. How,

then, [in terms of the use of language in perception,] can the distance between the use of things and their truth be lessened?

and how can one and the same man, a philosopher, claim to know

How precise is language use in perception? Which language - the verbal one or the natural one?

What is it to know the use of things?

comprehensively both the truth of things and their use?

How? e.g. It seems that philosophers can fall into error in their use of language in perception, on the one hand, and that plain men can receive a dose of the true way in which language ought to be used in perception, on the other. The distance between the use and the truth of things can, in this general way at least, be lessened from either the standpoint of the philosopher or that of the plain man. When philosophers use language as plain men normally do, but in the context of inquiry into the truth of things, such absurdities as abstract ~~general~~ ideas, material substance, real unity, and second causes are somehow imported into ^{*what is the use? as you speak? some perception?*} the philosophical perception of things. Since they have failed to guard their thinking against a prejudice that they should already have been aware of, these philosophers - the "false" ones for Berkeley - fail to reach the truth of things. When, alternatively, the plain man becomes aware that his ordinary perception of things rests on a prejudiced use of ^{*Have you shown this B says this?*} language, ^{*is it really understood?*} he becomes capable of seeing things as they truly are, or of entering, as an "enlightened" plain man, into agreement with "true" philosophers about the truth of things.

But the question how one and the same man can comprehend both the use and the truth of things still is unanswered. It seems that instead of lessening or abolishing the distance between the truth and the use of things, the false philosopher has only given up their truth, while the enlightened plain man may have given up their use. But Berkeley claims that neither

I still find the phrase very puzzling.

is the case. The false philosopher not only is barred from access to the truth of things, but with his false notions tends to mislead himself and plain men even about the right use of things. More importantly, the plain man who has been enlightened about the prejudiced use of language, and hence is ready to learn the truth of things, needs to give up their use no more than the true philosopher does when he comprehends both the truth and the use of things. If I understand Berkeley correctly, he is claiming that when either the enlightened plain man or the true philosopher reaches the truth of things, each also gains a new insight into the use of things. This scientific insight into the use of things is deeper, or perhaps different, than that of the ordinary, unreflective plain man. The "knowledge," by means of a scientifically incorrect use of language in perception, of the ordinary plain man suffices for ordinary practical communication with things. But the knowledge, by means of a scientifically correct use of language in perception, of enlightened plain men, scientists, or philosophers, does something more, or perhaps something different: if I understand Berkeley correctly, this knowledge consists in a progressive objectification of things with a view to their technological exploitation. *Will you then say this?*

Thus, the distance between the truth of things and the use of things can be lessened, but only if the use of things is regarded as the enlightened plain man or the philosopher, and not as the ordinary plain man - still a victim of a prejudiced

use of language in perception - would interpret it. In other words, the gap between the truth of things for the philosopher and the use of things for the plain man can be abolished, but only by reinterpreting the use of things or by making an enlightened plain man out of an ordinary plain man. Is there not, then, still a gap between the truth of things for the true philosopher and the use of things as the ordinary, unredeemed plain man understands it? or can the true philosopher communicate with this plain man about things any more effectively than either can communicate with a false philosopher about them?

Given these general remarks on the problem of the truth and the use of things in Berkeley's philosophy, I want to explicate his understanding of the difference between the use of language in scientific or philosophical perception and the use of language in ordinary naive perception. The distance between the truth and the use of things will be seen to be the same as that between the use of things for enlightened plain men or philosophers and the use of things for ordinary plain men. Both of these differences, in turn, will be seen to boil down to different uses of language in perception. I shall conclude that Berkeley cannot succeed in the attempt to bridge the gap between the truth and the use of things, as long as he refuses to allow the ordinary plain man's use of language in perception a role in the ontological constitution of things.

The philosopher's use of language rests, or at least ought to rest, on a precise insight into the truth or "nature" of

Does the prejudice come before the use of language?

things. The ordinary plain man's use of language rests on a prejudice about the truth or nature of things, though this prejudice is compatible with the use of things in ordinary life. The way in which the philosopher's insight into the truth of things is related to his "thoughts," *into another?* and the way in which the ordinary plain man's prejudice about the truth of things rests on the nature of language, can be illustrated by referring to several passages from Berkeley's writings.

For example, Berkeley analyzes the prejudiced view we ordinarily have about the nature of a quite everyday object (for his time), a coach:

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. (NTV, 46, p. 21)

The objects & the ideas give rise to an idea of unity, not of identity.

A similar analysis is made of an apple:

And as several of these [sensible qualities] 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. (PHK, 1, p. 77)

That one takes a word or name ("coach" or "apple") to refer to

one identifiable thing rather than to a number of essentially different things that are found to go together in a certain way, is a prejudice, resting on the nature of language but necessary for communication with things in ordinary practical life, that Berkeley attributes to the ordinary plain man's insight into the nature of things.

Berkeley has Philonous reveal to Hylas just how useful and ingenious a prejudice the nature of language has provided to ordinary plain men:

Strictly speaking, Hylas, 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 or individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable. Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniencies which are obvious upon a little thought, men combine together several ideas, apprehended by diverse 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.

(DHP, p. 194) *Again, we just consider the idea and then name them - this is not that with the name.*

Presumably, however, when Philonous speaks of "combining," "referring," and "considering," as if the percipient were aware of these activities, he must be speaking of the level of awareness of true philosophers or enlightened plain men. Surely the ordinary plain man and the false philosopher, whose use of words rests on a prejudice about the nature of things, are, in the case of the former, completely unaware of the prejudice

(Here, you wish to use 5 words not up to the prejudice, not the reason!)

labored under, or in the case of the latter, remissly forgetful of the activity of combining, referring, and considering in the perception of things. This qualification is important in the case of the ordinary plain man, whom Berkeley often, and unjustifiably, I believe, treats as having fallen into the standpoint of naive perception from a primal state of enlightened insight into the nature of things.

When Philonous speaks of a coach, he introduces the distinction, so very important for unprejudiced insight into the nature of things, between things immediately perceived and things mediately perceived:

When I hear a coach drive along the street, immediately I perceive only the sound; but from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach. It is nevertheless evident, that in truth and strictness, nothing can be heard but sound: and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience. So likewise when we are said to see a red-hot bar of iron; the solidity and heat of the iron are not the objects of sight, but suggested to the imagination by colour and figure, which are properly perceived by that sense. In short, those things alone are actually and strictly perceived by any sense, which would have been perceived, in case that same sense had then first been conferred on us. As for other things, it is plain they are only suggested to the mind by experience grounded on former perceptions. (DHP, p. 161)

Only those things which are properly and strictly perceived by each of the senses, acting independently of the others, are in

truth immediately perceived. A word or phrase ("Coach" or "bar of iron") can come to refer to any one or combination of these things indifferently, when they have been experienced to go together in such a way that the perception of any one of them by a sense will suggest any one or combination of the other things perceived by the other senses to the imagination. Berkeley also expresses the role of this distinction in levels of perception more generally:

By sensible object I understand that which is properly perceived by sense. Things properly perceived by sense are immediately perceived. Beside things properly and immediately perceived by any sense, there may also be other things suggested to the mind by means of those proper and immediate objects. Which things so suggested are not objects of that sense, being in truth only objects of the imagination, and originally belonging to some other sense or faculty. (TVV, 9, p. 234)

Strictly speaking, one perceives directly by the senses neither the coach's spatial position relative to one's own position or to the positions of other objects around it, nor even the coach itself. The coach and its position relative to other objects and to the percipient are suggested to the imagination by other things directly perceived by the senses, and found by experience to go together in certain ways.

But it is precisely in the naive perception of the ordinary plain man that things mediately perceived are taken for things immediately perceived:

Hence it is we find it so difficult to discriminate

between the immediate and mediate objects of sight, and are so prone to attribute to the former what belongs only to the latter. They are, as it were, most closely twisted, blended, and incorporated together. And this prejudice is confirmed and rivited in our thoughts by a long tract of time, by the use of language, and want of reflexion. (NTV, 51, p. 22). *Here again, language reinforces a prior prejudice.*

It is also important to note that the ordinary plain man, under the sway of the prejudice of taking an object in truth mediately perceived - say, a tangible "coach" - for an object in truth immediately perceived - which may actually be the visible or audible "coach" - will nevertheless say that he sees or hears a coach at a certain distance from him. Presumably he will also say, in the only way that makes sense to him, that he immediately perceives a coach, rather than sounds or colors. (Berkeley often speaks, incorrectly, I believe, as if that ordinary plain man would claim that he immediately perceives just those things which true philosophers or enlightened plain men would say he immediately perceives.) *How do you discriminate plain man?*

In addition to the combining of the perceptions of the various senses in experience, or the suggesting or signifying of an object mediately perceived by an object immediately perceived, an idea of unity is required by the percipient, in order to refer a combination of perceptions and one name to each other. Unity is ~~in truth not an objective~~ property of the thing named, however, but is, like the word used to refer to a thing, merely a designating entity: *- unity is an entity*

Number . . . is entirely a creature of the mind,

considering either an idea by itself, or any combination of ideas to which it gives one name, and so makes it pass for an unit. According as the mind variously combines its ideas the unit varies 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 its own ends and purposes Every combination of ideas is considered as one thing by the mind, and in token thereof is marked by one name. (NTV, 109, p. 40) *Agree, the considering comes first, then language, marks -*

That the ordinary plain man regards apples and coaches as real, objective units is, of course, an essential element of the prejudice conditioning his perception.

There are two remaining characteristics of the prejudice affecting the ordinary plain man's use of language in perception. The first involves the implicitly general character of the words ("coach" or "apple") used to refer to particular combinations of sensible qualities, or to the "things" in the ordinary plain man's perception. The second concerns the ontological implications of the subject-predicate structure of sentences about things in natural languages.

First, Berkeley warns philosophers about the fallacy of assuming that a general name must refer by way of types or common natures to tokens or particular instances of them:

'Tis 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.

And that it is by the mediation of these abstract ideas, that a general name comes to signify any particular thing. Whereas, in truth, there is no such thing as one precise and definite signification annexed to any general name, they all signifying indifferently a great number of particular ideas. (PHK, 18, p. 73)

For Berkeley, there exist no common or specific natures, such as "appleness" or "treeness," to which the words "apple" or "tree" refer, either by abstraction in the mind or as concretely shared by particular apples or trees. But that the ordinary plain man has no idea of what a tree is, or of "treeness," apart from a particular idea of a spruce or a poplar or a maple, is, Berkeley's claim notwithstanding, by no means evident.

Second, Berkeley warns philosophers about the fallacy of assuming that sentences possessing a subject and predicates refer to a relation between a substance and its attributes. The prejudice that the structure of grammar reflects the structure of existence is as inveterate as the prejudice that the general character of words implies the existence of specific natures. To this end, Berkeley outlines what false philosophers normally take to be the meaning of propositions:

For instance, in this proposition, a die is hard, extended and square, they will have it that the word die denotes a subject or substance, distinct from the hardness, extension and figure, which are predicated of it, and in which they exist. (PHK, 49, p. 91)

Does the remark say that grammar leads us to go the wrong way?

and proposes his own reform of language, which transforms ontological significance into nominal significance:

. . . to say that a die is hard, extended and square, is not to attribute those qualities to a subject distinct from and supporting them, but only an explanation of the meaning of the word die. (PHK 49, p. 91)

Nevertheless, we can suppose that when the ordinary plain man says that the apple is sweet, hard, round, and red, he means that the single thing that he sees at a distance possesses in itself all of these properties.

Given the presentation of Berkeley's argument and the tentative rejoinders above, his position on the two uses of language in perception can now be summed up. For Berkeley, a thing - say, an apple - is in truth a number of other things *for the mind* - sensible qualities or ideas - combined together in a certain way, designated as a unit, and given a name by the percipient. This percipient, either the true philosopher or the enlightened plain man, is, then, if one uses this label guardedly, a nominalist. That is, progress in enlightenment consists in becoming aware of the prejudices of thinking one is normally seduced into by the ordinary use of language. Progress in science and philosophy, or progress in the pursuit of the truth or nature of a thing, consists in avoiding these prejudices, and in becoming aware of the ways in which a number of things, as referred to by one name, are related. In so far as the nominalist approach to language enables one to resolve things into their elements and to discover their precise relations, this specific use of language makes philosophy, science, and the knowledge of the truth of things possible. In so far as one is able to reconstruct things

synthetically on the basis of prior analytical resolution, a nominalist use of language also makes technology, or a kind of use of things, possible. *How?*

But is the nominalist use of language also a condition of the possibility of the perception or use of things in ordinary life? Can nominalist assumptions about language account for its use in the ordinary, naive perception of things? Berkeley often speaks as if the ordinary plain man were himself a nominalist, or at least, like the false philosopher, a nominalist who forgets that he is one. And in the case of the ordinary plain man, he could be excused for doing so, since he is bound by no imperatives of the intellectual conscience to pursue the truth of things to the bitter end. Presumably, the false philosophers, who ought to understand the value of a precise use of language for the pursuit of the truth of things, can be brought back into the fold by some nominalistic persuasion. But what of the ordinary plain man, whose very perception of and ability to communicate practically with things has, for all he knows, always rested on certain prejudices about the nature of things - prejudices in which the very nature of language itself has benignly ensnared him?

I submit that the ordinary plain man is not himself a nominalist, and that the use of language he makes in perception is not explicable on the basis of a nominalist view of language. The nature of language lends itself to a non-nominalistic employment in our ordinary communication with things. If this

were not the case, enlightened plain men, not to mention philosophers, could continually befuddle ordinary plain men with sophistries, as Peter Lorre does in a movie in which he plays a character on trial for brutally murdering several women. When questioned by the prosecution, Lorre claims, in his inimitable tone of voice:

Murder her? I did not murder her! I did have this knife in my hand, and before I knew it, the knife was inserted into the back of the woman, and turned around several times. But I did not murder her!

Another case of such sophistry is the argument of some wags that if little girls were not conditioned at home to fear nudity, then they would not feel threatened when they see strange men exposing themselves on subway trains.

I have no doubt that a nominalist use of language in perception is an essential condition of progress in science and technology. Berkeley and Hobbes, among others, I think, have admirably demonstrated the connection between scientific progress and the reform of linguistic usage. Berkeley might even be right, for all I know, in his nominalist attack on the "metaphysical absurdities" of the false philosophers. That this attack can be extended to the use of language in our ordinary communication with things is what I find questionable.

Could one not, to conclude, turn the Scriptures against Berkeley's extension of nominalism to the use of language in naive perception? Take the following exchange between Hylas and Philonous:

HYLAS. What shall we make then of the Creation?

PHILONOUS. 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 they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures, in that order and manner which he then established, and we now call the Laws of Nature? (DHP, p. 200)

Philonous' account suggests that the creation consists in God's revealing to the scientist, the true philosopher, or the enlightened plain man the order and connection of ideas that constitute the true nature of things. That God so fashioned language that it would lend itself to this nominalist usage, I see no need to question. But if this were all that the creation represents, then ordinary plain men would still be unable to distinguish an apple from a coach or even to see either one. Fortunately, the creation can also be viewed as the a priori establishment of all of the natural languages, without which our commerce with things in ordinary life would be impossible. In this vital sense, then, without the words "apple" and "coach," no apples or coaches could exist. In ordinary, naive perception, at least, both language and perception are not external to the being of things.

Not q. when you say deal with language
in the usual sense - real language.
Are you suggesting - as B suggests - that
we have pay close attention to a natural
language? Just for (order) to real
language? Or is natural language also
prejudice & confusion?