Browne’s Critique of Religious Propositions in Berkeley: A Reply to Pearce

Introduction

In the introduction to *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, George Berkeley set out to diagnose and refute what he believed to be the source of error in the prevailing view about language of his day. While Berkeley hones his focus on John Locke’s doctrine of abstract ideas, his attack has a much larger, historically-entrenched theory of language as its target: the view that words and propositions are meaningful if and only if they signify intelligible ideas. Through a series of arguments set to show how this conception of meaning is mistaken, Berkeley’s own express views about language peek through. He insists that though words do indeed garner their meanings through convention, it is patently impossible for some one idea to be the token meaning of a word. Instead, Berkeley tells us that words are meaningful insofar as they dispose us to act or feel a certain way through conventionally applied rules. In *Things Divine and Supernatural*, Peter Browne ridicules Berkeley’s account primarily on the basis that it is impossible for language to be useful and truth-evaluable where words signify nothing at all.

In his book *Language and the Structure of Berkeley’s World*, Kenneth Pearce propounds a thorough use-as-meaning interpretation of Berkeley’s views about language. In chapter 8, Pearce argues that once we uncover Berkeley’s views about assent and truth, Browne’s contention is met with a satisfactory retort. Though I take Pearce’s account of Berkeley’s theory of language to be largely textually-accurate, I argue that it symptomatically renders a portion of Browne’s argument all the more weighty and successful. In the first section of this paper, I briefly recapitulate Pearce’s account of Berkeley’s theory of meaning, and finish by introducing
Peter Browne’s argument against Berkeley. In the second, I critically analyze Pearce’s attempt to exculpate Berkeley from the throes of Browne’s criticism and argue that his attempt not only misses the thrust of Browne’s contestation, but it also cannot provide any forthcoming answer to what is actually at stake.

Section 1: Berkeley’s Operative Language and Browne’s Criticism

Before diving directly into Peter Browne’s criticism of Berkeley, it will prove helpful to briefly spell out Berkeley’s theory of meaning. In his book *The Language and Structure of Berkeley’s World*, Kenneth Pearce offers up an illuminating use-as-meaning reading of Berkeley’s views about language. With concision, such a reading takes Berkeley to be of the view that words are meaningful insofar as they are associated with conventional rules through which they are used to attain practical ends. Pearce notes that though some of these conventional rules are ideational — such that “they permit us to exchange words for ideas,” many other uses are operative; this latter, ‘operative’ category derives from a word or proposition’s capacity to direct us to action, or to elicit certain passions without the intervention of ideas.¹

Contrary to many other figures of his day, Berkeley argues that the communication of ideas is neither the sole, nor primary function of language. *Principles* 14 concisely encapsulates Berkeley’s contrariety concerning the use of words. There, whereby words are signs, he writes that

...they do not always suggest ideas signified to the mind: that when they suggest ideas, they are not general abstract ideas: that they have other uses besides barely standing for and exhibiting ideas, such as raising proper emotions, producing certain dispositions or habits of mind, and directing our actions in pursuit of that happiness which is the ultimate end and design, the primary spring and motive, that sets rational agents at work: that signs may imply or suggest the relations of things; which relations, habitudes or proportions, as they cannot be by us understood but by the help of signs, so being thereby expressed and confuted, they direct and enable us to act with regard to things: that the true end of speech,

¹ Kenneth Pearce, *The Language and Structure of Berkeley’s World* (66).
Here, we can see quite clearly that the primary use of language for Berkeley is operative: we use language to practically obtain our ends, where obtaining our ends through the use of words is principally achieved through a word or proposition disposing others to action, or eliciting some passion. Again, it is imperative to highlight that the success of using language is not necessarily contingent on a word or proposition’s capacity to signify ideas. It is on this point exactly that Browne takes issue.

In *Things Divine and Supernatural*, Peter Browne vehemently contests Berkeley’s views about language on the basis that words with no ideational signification can play the role that Berkeley says they can, and do, in human discourse. For Browne, it is because Berkeley rejects the notion that words are meaningful through communicating precise ideational content that his theory of language fails. Browne takes the communication of ideas to be necessary in fostering these types of instrumental goods, and because he believes Berkeley’s views about the use of language is dependent upon the communication of ideas, it is self-defeating. Browne entreats his readers to consider how language can be prescriptive if it is actually the case that “Words may be Significant, though they signify Nothing.”

When considering religious propositions or utterances, Browne writhingly writes that having faith would be no more than “believing in certain Sounds and Syllables,” and moreover, that faith in God amounts to “Faith in a Monosyllable.” As Pearce recognizes, Browne has

---

4 Browne (SB 682).
illuminated an apparent hole in Berkeley’s view: if it is true that certain words do not, or cannot signify determinate ideas, then it appears that certain propositions fail to be truth-evaluable.

Pearce on Berkeleyan Assent and Truth as Exculpatory

Pearce correctly points out that Browne’s objection to Berkeley’s theory of language is most pointedly directed at the implication it has for divine predication. Given that Browne characterizes Berkeley as holding the view that signs may be significant although they fail to signify anything, Browne believes that Berkeley commits himself to the position that all theological language fails to describe reality, and therefore that “all faith would terminate in the ear.” According to Pearce, Browne’s contention takes root in his recognition that Berkeley rejects Lockean mental propositions; mental propositions are mental states which allegedly represent the world in such a way that effectually suffice as grounds to both distinguish sincere from insincere assertions, as well as understanding a sentence from merely hearing sounds. If we are to understand mental states as ideas (as distinct from a passion or dispositional state), and also that ideas alone are fit to genuinely represent reality, Pearce concedes on Browne’s behalf that Berkeley appears to have no forthcoming answer to how it is that utterances like “God is wise” can make contact with reality.

Pearce frames Browne’s objection in the following way:

Insofar as Browne’s objection stems from the elimination of the mental proposition, it is fundamentally a problem about propositional assent (belief) and truth. As a result, the fact that, as I argued in the previous chapter, Berkeley’s theory does allow that the word ‘God’ may be genuinely referential does not yet provide an adequate response to Browne. If the sentence ‘God is wise’ does not correspond to a representational mental state, Browne wants to know, then how can that sentence make contact with reality? Even if the word ‘God’ is genuinely referential this will not by itself secure the status of ‘God is wise’ as a truth-evaluable claim about the world.

---

5 Peter Browne (1733, 508) quoted in Kenneth Pearce, *Language and the Structure of Berkeley's World* (139).
6 Pearce (140).
7 Pearce (140).
It is worth a moment’s pause to get clear on the sense in which Pearce takes the word ‘God’ to be genuinely referential for Berkeley before proceeding. The reason that Pearce does not take it that the word ‘God,’ being genuinely referential, will save Berkeley from Browne is because of the peculiar sense in which it is referential. A portion of chapter 7 in Pearce’s book is dedicated to shedding light on how the words ‘spirit’ and ‘God’ are referential; I can only give a pithy account of what he says there, here. To the question of “how do we succeed in (genuinely) referring to the entities in question,” Pearce has the following to say:

...‘spirit’ talk must originally derive its meaningfulness from its use to label the self. Berkeley's emphasis on the immediacy of my knowledge of myself might seem to indicate that I can simply apply the label ‘spirit’ directly to myself, in the way I apply ‘red’ to an idea or ‘imagining’ to an action.8

From this, though not much else is said, we are alleged to gather that “spirit talk” is genuinely referential insofar as it adequately labels the immediate knowledge one has of one’s self. Moving to the way in which the term ‘God’ is genuinely referential according to Berkeley, Pearce tells us that “Genuine reference to God (or any other mind) depends essentially on the resemblance between that mind and my own.”9 Despite the fact that we make use of spirit or God talk, neither manner of speaking corresponds with representational mental content; for only ideas are representational, and Berkeley is quite explicit that we have no ideas of spirits nor God.

It is also quite unclear how Berkeley could coherently maintain that we may genuinely refer to God in virtue of the resemblance between His mind and one of ours. Berkeley famously attacks Locke’s resemblance thesis on the basis that only an idea can resemble an idea. This claim alone obviously does not rule out the possibility of some entity that is not an idea

---

8 Pearce (132).
9 Pearce (133).
resembling something else that is not an idea. Nevertheless, Berkeley strikes down this possibility out head-on in *Principles* 8:

I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but ever so little into our thought *we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas.*

Because talk of God fails to correspond to ideational, representational mental contents, Pearce focuses in on an alternative method to subvert Browne’s attack. For Pearce, Berkeley can escape Browne’s critique unscathed so long as his conceptions of assent and truth are uncovered. In chapter 8 titled “Assent and Truth,” Pearce argues that assent for Berkeley lies manifestly in dispositional states to have some passions, to act, or to have ideas; to assent to some proposition is not necessarily, as per Locke’s purported view, to ‘match up’ ideas in the understanding. As Pearce argues, even in those instances where we are furnished with ideas elicited by words which we can compare, to discover their consistency is insufficient for assenting — rather, assenting for Berkeley is “constituted *entirely* by the affective and volitional response.”

So much clearly seems to suffice for assenting to religious or theological propositions, but this does not get Berkeley out of hot water with Browne, and Pearce recognizes this. The task at hand now for Berkeley is to provide an answer to whether or not propositions (which are meaningful so far forth as they dispose us to act or feel some conventional way) are truth-evaluable where their signification is non-ideational. Pearce reads Berkeley as being of the view that truth and falsity of propositions consist in the *degrees* to which they connect our thoughts and actions to the world:

Berkeley’s claim is that the sentence ‘fire heats’ (PHK, §) is false to a high degree “if taken in a strict and speculative sense,” but may be retained insofar as it is associated with dispositions to feeling and action “necessary for our well-being” (PHK, §). The key truth in the claim that fire heats

---

11 Pearce (147).
is that a good way to make something hot is to put it near a fire. Assent to the sentence ‘fire heats’ does involve a disposition to follow this piece of advice.12

Though this view is characteristically pragmatic or relativistic, Pearce places heavy stock in the notion that sentences can only be truth-evaluable “in the context of the total sign-system in which they are embedded.”13 On this construal, Berkeley apparently escapes Browne’s criticism on the basis that claims like “God is wise” are true to a high degree insofar as they dispose use to feel and act certain ways in the totality of the world which is characteristically conducive to our utility. At the end of chapter 8, Pearce concludes by stating the following:

We have now seen how Berkeley answers Browne. Faith does not ‘terminate in the ear,’ but rather the will. Assent, including religious faith, is a matter of having certain dispositions to speech, thought, feeling, and action. It is this that distinguishes sincere from insincere professions. Furthermore, these dispositions serve to connect our thought and action to the world, and they can do so well or badly. To the degree that they connect us well, the beliefs are true.14

While Pearce’s account certainly provides an alternative explanation on Berkeley’s behalf for how we can claim that certain theological utterances may be more or less true (and thus how they can be significant while simultaneously failing to signify any ideas), it nevertheless only partly satisfies Browne’s contention. So I see it, the meat of what Browne is after is whether or not religious propositions can actually be said to be descriptive of entities in Berkeley’s schema, and thereby provide a comparatively more sturdy reason for assent. Pearce does, as we have seen, state there is a sense in which a sentence like “God is wise” is genuinely referential according to Berkeley, but the sense in which it is would surely be unsatisfying for Browne — for it does not, and cannot refer to an idea for Berkeley, nor anything else that is fit to be veridically representational. Instead, and even if Berkeley could coherently maintain that

---

12 Pearce (166).
13 Pearce (172).
14 Pearce (171).
‘God’ refers in virtue of there being a resemblance between His mind and ours, the word ‘God’ still fails to signify anything that is apt to bear descriptions; for Berkeley, spirits cannot be described, or mentally framed, in terms of ideas.

What seems to be the driving motivation for Browne is that Berkeley seems to be unable to give an adequately descriptive account of religious entities, where predications of some religious entity can be said to be true \textit{in virtue of their inherence of the subject being described}. Pearce’s account fails to provide a means whereby Berkeley’s theory of language can do this. Browne, so I believe, would not care if we can say meaningfully that “God is wise” on the basis that we are disposed to act practically in the world upon hearing it, and so long as it does in fact (to some degree) accomplish that for us, it is true. Hypothetically, Browne could agree with Berkeley’s account of truth and assent as one way in which some sentences can be true (though this is highly doubtful), and all the while insist that we want to know that some utterances are true because they \textit{actually} refer to the way the world is. On Pearce’s construal of Berkeley, divine predications cannot refer to an entity (namely God) as actually having the qualities that we ascribe to Him, but only to dispositional states, and it is on this point precisely that Pearce’s interpretation falters. Browne demands that the \textit{reasons} for assenting to some proposition (which in turn renders it prescriptive) be rooted in its truth-evaluable description.

What must Pearce must provide for Berkeley then, is an explanation for \textit{why} it is unimportant for us to be able to assess sentences about God and his attributes where we have no signifying ideational content that serves to aptly represent Him. Beyond this, it is important that we know why propositions that we \textit{can} assess on the basis that they signify some coherent set of ideas do not have higher epistemic merit than otherwise.
Interestingly, it seems that Berkeley does himself care about certain cases in which we evaluate sentences for truth or falsity on the basis that they either do or do not actually refer to concrete ideas we have. Berkeley vehemently combats materialism by utilizing various arguments in which take utterances like “matter exist” to be false on the basis that they do not and cannot refer to any set of coherent ideas in our minds. Berkeley’s corpus is rife with instances of this kind of reasoning, but here I will only make reference to two passages in the principles:

It is said extension is a mode or accident of Matter, and that Matter is the substratum that supports it. Now I desire that you would explain to me what is meant by Matter’s supporting extension. Say you, I have no idea of Matter and therefore cannot explain it. I answer, though you have no positive, yet, if you have any meaning at all, you must at least have a relative idea of Matter; though you know not what it is, yet you must be supposed to know what relation it bears to accidents, and what is meant by its supporting them.\(^\text{15}\)

Here, we get a pretty vivid example of Berkeley refuting one’s reasoning for believing in matter because the meaning of the word ‘matter’ has no ideational content. To the same end, just later in the *Principles*, Berkeley goes further by writing that

If we inquire into what the most accurate philosophers declare themselves to mean by material substance, we shall find them acknowledge they have no other meaning annexed to those sounds but 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 other, and as for its supporting accidents, this, as we have just now observed, cannot be understood in the common sense of those words; it must therefore be taken in some other sense, but what that is they do not explain. *So that when I consider the two parts or branches which make the signification of the words material substance, I am convinced there is no distinct meaning annexed to them.*\(^\text{16}\)

From this, it seems that Berkeley is arguing that the words ‘matter’ and ‘supporting accidents’ (the “two parts or branches” in question) are used infelicitously by the materialists precisely

\(^{15}\) Berkeley, *PHK* (16).

\(^{16}\) Berkeley, *PHK* (17).
because neither word/set of words are used meaningfully; the reason that they are not used meaningfully is because they refer to no idea/ideas we have whatsoever.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, Pearce takes himself to successfully exculpate Berkeley from Browne, insofar as Berkeley has alternative means by which we can assent and evaluate the truth and falsity of theological propositions. However, and as I have argued, Pearce misses the thrust of Browne’s contestation. Browne demands that we are able to evaluate and assent to religious propositions on the basis that they refer to religious entities that are capable of bearing descriptions, where divine predications are true in virtue of their inherence in the subject being described.

It may be argued that it is because Berkeley disagrees that assenting to and evaluating certain propositions depends on our capacity to mentally frame the signification of the words ideationally that it is unimportant that we cannot do so with respect to theological language. This maneuver not only seems hamfisted, but there is abundant textual evidence suggesting that Berkeley makes use of our inability to mentally frame a coherent set of ideas signified by words as reason to proclaim that certain propositions are false.

Surely Berkeley would want to preserve utterances about God as being the most meaningful; but if we are to understand propositions that fail to signify ideational content as being meaningless, and therefore not truth-evaluable, we are apparently forced to concede on Berkeley’s behalf that those propositions that do signify determinate ideas are comparatively more truth-evaluable. If we are to adopt Pearce’s reading of Berkeley, then our conviction towards acting practically in the world upon hearing utterances would reasonably be amplified where our reasons for assenting take root in our recognition that the propositions in question are
fitting descriptions of what we take the world to be like. As Browne points out, religious utterances fail to have this quality; as such, they fail to be as prescriptive as Berkeley would like, if at all.

Works Cited

