

Berkeley, Descartes and the Science of Nature

(Or How Berkeley Tried to Put the Clock Back)¹

By Jonathan Dancy

ALTHOUGH BERKELEY'S ATTACK ON REALISM OF THE SORT EXEMPLIFIED BY Locke is primarily skeptical, his main weapon is not epistemological but semantic skepticism. He does indeed ask how, if the world were really as Locke says it is, we would ever be able to come to know that it is there or what it is like. But he is much more concerned to show that we cannot even understand (or conceive the truth of) the claims of realism.² If this is true, then a fortiori there can be no reason to believe them true. Anyone who claims otherwise is contending for they know not what.

In this paper, however, I leave on one side the semantic skepticism and focus more directly on the epistemological. What I am interested in here is not so much Berkeley's attacks on the views of others as his own epistemology — his positive theory. In claiming that realism is vulnerable to epistemological skepticism he implicitly claims that his idealism is not. To see whether this is so we need to ask just what was the skeptical challenge which Locke could not meet but Berkeley supposedly could. I have long been persuaded by Edward Craig's view (1987) that in the tradition within which Berkeley wrote, human cognitive capacities were conceived on the model of those of God. Knowledge, in particular, is a perfect relationship between mind and fact, and if so the relationship we are in when (or if) we know a fact must be the same as that which God is in when he knows the same fact. In some cases we do manage to get into such a perfect relation to a fact. The standard example is that of simple arithmetical truths, such as that 2 and 2 make 4. Our knowledge of this is as perfect as we can conceive knowledge to be, and so here we can claim to be in the very same state that God is in with respect to the fact we know. In these cases the relation in which we stand to the truth is just the relation in which God stands to that, and to all other, truths. Elsewhere, of course, we cannot make this claim. Sometimes this is for reasons restricted to the particular case. We may not know who that is at the end of the corridor because the lighting there is a bit dim. But there is also the general possibility that there are some sorts of cognition that are inherently less

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perfect than that of God. But God knows all facts directly, without inference or intermediary. He sees their truth in much the same sort of way that we see that 2 and 2 make 4. And this means that any indirect or mediated relation to a fact will not be knowledge.

From this perspective, Locke's epistemology is an evident failure. His indirect or representative realism fails generally to show that our perceptual relation to a fact can be knowledge, because it holds that our relationship to the facts we perceive is mediated by the products of the senses. It follows from this that our relationship to those facts is never identical with God's, and so is not true knowledge. And one would gain nothing by moving to a non-Lockean theory that held our perceptual knowledge to be the product of some form of inference. God's knowledge of these facts is not inferential. Berkeley's idealism is in a much better position to secure the possibility of perceptual knowledge of our surroundings. At least, this is so if one can take Berkeley as holding that the ideas of sense are identical with and not mere copies of ideas in the mind of God. Given this, in a case where a table is before us the idea we have in mind is exactly part of the actual table itself. Real things, for Berkeley, are transparently present to us without intermediary, copy or inference. And this means that at least in some cases our relationship to what we perceive can be identical with God's relationship to that same thing, and so count as the true and perfect state which is knowledge.

So: does Berkeley indeed hold that (some of) the ideas of sense are identical with ideas in the mind of God? One might think that this idea is so blatantly incoherent that not even Berkeley could entertain it. But Berkeley is not a man who is easily frightened off. And even a quick reading of the Dialogues reveals that he takes seriously two distinct models of the relation between our ideas and those of God. The first is a relation between archetype and ectype; God's ideas are the archetypes and ours are the ectypes (copies). The second is the identity relation: in perception, God shares with us those of his ideas that he chooses to make available to us. In several places in the Third Dialogue Berkeley blatantly ducks the question whether our ideas of sense are (or can be) identical with ideas in the Divine Mind, using such expressions as 'they or their archetypes'. And it is noticeable that in the correspondence that survives between Berkeley and the American philosopher Samuel Johnson, Johnson asks in his first letter exactly the question whether our ideas are ectypes and those of God archetypes or not, and though Berkeley does say something about this in his reply, it does not amount to a straightforward answer to the question. Johnson returns to the issue in his second letter, but Berkeley's reply to that takes up other issues, leaving this one unaddressed. It seems to me fairly clear from this sort of evidence that Berkeley knew that, for the battle against skepticism, he needed to maintain that the ideas of sense which are the physical objects that we see are indeed identical with ideas in the mind of God. For otherwise his idealism gives him no epistemological advantage at all. My suspicion is that he did not press the issue because he did not really know how to manage the difficulties it raises. I don't doubt, however, that he would have pointed out that, no matter what we want to say about the way in which one human (or created) mind is closed to another, that tells us nothing about the possible relations between a divine mind and a human one.

God, of course, knows all our ideas as directly as he knows everything else; he is not reduced to inspecting copies of them. Why should the reverse not be possible: that we know some divine ideas as directly as God does?

I will take it from here on that the best model for Berkeley is the identity model, so that in perception God shares some of his ideas with us. I want rather to contrast what he says about perceptual skepticism with what he says about a second skeptical difficulty, which concerns scientific knowledge. In my view Berkeley takes science to offer the best and brightest of human knowledge. But it is very difficult to see how this can be so from the perspective I have been outlining. Surely on any account scientific knowledge is largely inferential. And on Berkeley's own account, at least as normally understood, this is certainly so. At *Principles* 65 he says that one natural event is the mark or sign of another, and our knowledge of what is a sign of what looks irredeemably inferential. So on this interpretation Berkeley himself shows that our scientific knowledge would never constitute anything like the relation God is in to the same facts, and in effect cannot be true and perfect knowledge at all.

This failure is compounded by another. When he turns to consider natural science, Berkeley is faced by two problems. The first is the claim of science to produce knowledge. We have already looked at this, and seen that Berkeley's apparent answer is unsatisfying. But any successful answer here would satisfy two further constraints, of which Berkeley's only succeeds in satisfying one. First, it would give a suitable account of the relation between scientific and non-scientific knowledge of the same event. Berkeley's answer does succeed in doing this because the scientist's knowledge of the regularities in the course of nature only improves on ordinary knowledge of the same sort. There is no distinction of type here. Second, a successful answer would come with a cognate account of the nature of scientific explanation. It would give us a satisfying account of how what science tells us does in fact serve to explain the events happening around us. The theory Berkeley was attacking did well in this respect, as he knew. The task of explanation is to restore our sense that the event to be explained was bound to happen, could not but take place in the circumstances. The mechanists were able to achieve this. One's mechanical understanding of a clock puts one into a position in which one can tell that when a weight is attached at such and such a point these and those events not only will but must take place. Or even if mechanism failed to achieve this ideal outcome it recognized this failure as an embarrassing imperfection. But Berkeley's own theory, which sees natural events as the signs of others with which they are connected in a regular way due to the benevolent will of God, fails signally to provide any sense of a necessary connection between natural events. The passage of events is, though regular, both contingent and arbitrary. The only necessity in the case is that things should happen as God has determined. There is no natural necessity, but only the irresistible will of God. Berkeley seems to admit this point at *Principles* 106:

There is nothing necessary or essential in the case, but it depends entirely on the will of the governing spirit, who causes certain bodies to cleave together, or tend towards each other, according to various laws.

These laws are not statements about how the world must go, but arbitrarily imposed and essentially contingent regularities. So we can (perhaps) know that things will go on this way, but we cannot know why. And to this extent all that scientific explanation can achieve, on Berkeley's account, will fall short of giving us an understanding of the course of nature. We will have prediction but no real explanation.

It therefore seems to me unsurprising that Berkeley's philosophy of science has received scarce attention, and indeed is thought of as little more than an unsuccessful rearguard action rather than as a positive contribution to the subject. The only thing to be said for it is that it gives a reasonable account of the relation between non-scientific and scientific knowledge, and of the move from one to the other.

My own view, however, is that what has gone wrong is not so much Berkeley's philosophy of science as the standard account of that philosophy - the one I have been working with so far. We have put blinkers over our own eyes and then complained that Berkeley cannot see. In particular, we have imposed on an otherwise fruitful position an attitude which would have seemed very unnatural to him. What I mean is this. At *Principles* 65 Berkeley speaks of the way in which one natural event can be a sign for another, and can mean that it will occur or has occurred. We tend to approach this with something like Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning in mind, and to suppose that Berkeley is best understood to be talking about natural meaning. (Grice 1957) Grice leads us to suppose that the sense in which the spots mean measles or the clouds mean bad weather tomorrow (this is natural meaning) is to be understood in terms of regular connections, and Berkeley's remarks about natural events being signs of other such have been standardly taken in this way too. This seems to me to be a mistake, and what I want to do is to lay out a different Berkeleyian philosophy of science based on the idea that natural events are to be seen as having the sort of meaning that linguistic utterances have, which in Grice's terms would be non-natural meaning.

There are both external and internal reasons for seeing Berkeley's philosophy of science in this new way. The external reason is that the resulting theory is much richer and more interesting, both in the philosophy of science and in surrounding areas, as I hope to show below. The internal reason is that Berkeley, in trying to explain the complexity discovered by science in natural events without lapsing into materialism, speaks of the basic elements of which those events are constructed (the building blocks of nature, so to speak) as analogous to the letters out of which words are constructed. The microscopic events are the words, their elements the letters; and words are constructed out of letters 'by rule and wise contrivance', so that scientists become the grammarians of nature. This thought is very prominent in the *New Theory of Vision* (secs. 146-7), and later in the *Siris* (secs. 248 ff.); there are many allusions to it in Berkeley's work.

My immediate point is that Berkeley's use of the analogy between letters and the natural elements, together with the very many references to the idea that the natural world is the language of God found from his earliest to his latest works, should be taken as *prima facie* evidence that he is not thinking of the sort of meanings that natural events have as natural meanings in Grice's sense.

Surely one's first thought is that Berkeley means his linguistic analogy seriously. Natural events are to be conceived of straightforwardly as divine utterances. In these God is speaking to us in a language which we can understand to some extent without science, but which science will help us understand a great deal better. We might even go so far with Grice as to suppose that these natural events have a non-natural meaning in virtue of their expression of Gricean communication-intentions on the part of God.

However in my view the analogy between microscopical particles or events, on the one side, and the letters which make up our written words on the other, is a mistake on Berkeley's part. He has opted for a syntactical or even morphological analogy when he should have opted for a semantical one. That it is a mistake can be shown by the fact that the syntactical analogy gives quite the wrong account of the relation between nonscientific and scientific knowledge. For suppose that we understand and speak a language already perfectly well. What can the grammarian add to our understanding and competence? Not a lot, it seems; and this means that on the syntactic analogy the contribution of science is fairly minimal. But if we shift to a semantic analogy, taking the basic constituents of natural events to be the minimum semantic units, we can understand the relation between scientific and non-scientific understanding of an event (to be thought of as an utterance now) as analogous to the relation between an understanding which is not based on an ability to divide the sentence up into words which can recur in other contexts and an understanding which is so based. Non-scientific understanding is like what you start with when you are taught a language by the oral method; you know what the sentence means but you don't know why it means it (or how it gets to mean it).

So I suggest that Berkeley's use of the syntactic rather than the semantic analogy is a mistake. And his use of the syntactic analogy shows that though he is close to it, he did not perhaps ever succeed in making the final move to what could be called the semantic turn. Still, I want to argue that what he has already said in fact commits him to the semantic turn, but that he didn't quite see this, and hid from himself and failed to capitalise on some of the rich pickings which it makes available to him.

What are these rich pickings? We can see the first by returning to our skeptical questions about scientific knowledge. We saw two difficulties there. First, skepticism about perceptual knowledge was answered in a way that did not extend to include scientific knowledge; in fact it rendered scientific knowledge impossible. Second, scientific knowledge, conceived as knowledge of the natural meanings of physical events, seemed incurably inferential. To take the second of these first, it is an interesting and important question in contemporary epistemology just what it is for knowledge or awareness to be inferential - what is included and excluded here. But are we at all tempted to say that our knowledge of the meanings of what we say to each other is inferential? The compositional nature of our linguistic competence is of course admitted. But I would want to argue that though a sophisticated speaker knows the meanings of the words and of the ways those words are put together, the way this knowledge functions in generating our understanding of any particular utterance is not inferential. So I think that the semantic analogy already improves here over the position normally

attributed to Berkeley.

Of course it remains the case that at our present stage of scientific progress scientific knowledge is stubbornly inferential. In that sense we now resemble people who are painstakingly learning a second language. Increases in our knowledge of what the words mean and what different constructions mean are achieved largely by inference. But at the end of the day, when we become as fluent in that language as we are in our own, our ability to understand and create for ourselves utterances in it is not inferential. And this is the situation which science will be in at the end of the day. Scientific knowledge is inferential at the moment, but it will not always be so.

Putting the matter this way makes it appear that Berkeley is committed to the fantastic claim that at some point the enterprise of science will be completed; but we don't suppose any such thing, and there is no real reason to think that he did either. Our knowledge of a language can become good enough to render our understanding of individual utterances non-inferential long before that knowledge reaches the mythical peak of completeness. And we can make the same claim for science. It would be a simple mistake to link the move to the non-inferential to any ideal of the completeness of natural science.

What about the relation between the two skepticisms? It seems to me that Berkeley has a choice here. He can stick to the ground already gained against perceptual skepticism, at the cost of perpetuating an unfortunate divide between perceptual and scientific knowledge. Alternatively, he can abandon the position on perception that I described earlier, for the sake of a smoother relation between perception and science, but at the cost of losing some of the advantages he likes to claim from the way his position enshrines common sense. The second option seems to me probably the better, philosophically. Originally we said that sometimes at least a physical object, a real thing (an idea of sense) is transparently present to the mind, so that our knowledge of it is no less perfect than God's knowledge. But there is an unfortunate atomism at work here. The claim is that we can know, and know perfectly, these very little bits of the story, even though we know nothing of how they fit in with other things. We have these little unconnected nuggets of perfect knowledge. Now suppose that, persuaded by the vision of natural events as utterances of God's and of science as a better understanding of those utterances, we admit that each event is semantically rich in a way not allowed by common sense. Our perceptual knowledge will not now count as full and perfect knowledge of anything. It is merely partial knowledge of something that, with science, we hope later to know better. Here perception and science are smoothly related in a way that is bound to demote the claims of perception to provide knowledge in its own right. Does this matter? The loss for Berkeley seems to me to be that he must now abandon his insistence that the world is as common sense takes it to be, in a way which only his theory can capture. Perhaps this loss could be seen as merely dialectical: he has lost a weapon in the argument, but not an important part of the theory. But it seems to me possible that this admission undermines Berkeley's severely realist intuitions³ and his attempt to guarantee that the world is as we experience it as being. If experience and perception are truncated, incomplete forms of awareness of the natural world, why afford them the immunity that our realist intuitions grant them? They stand

in need of the supplementation that only scientific knowledge can give them.

The first option is to suppose that the sense in which perceptual knowledge can be supplemented by scientific knowledge is not one which lessens the claim of our perceptual knowledge to be true and perfect knowledge of its own object. But this seems to me less attractive even though it offers an early if limited victory over epistemological skepticism. It seems very difficult to suppose that our perceptual knowledge of the world around us, which on the analogy is to be seen as a sort of crude understanding of what things mean which can be deepened by science, is in some restricted field incapable of improvement.

So it seems that Berkeley has an awkward choice here. I leave this problem, however, to consider the other constraint on the new account of scientific knowledge, namely the account of scientific explanation that goes with it. Here we find that the view of natural events as God's language completely alters the situation. Instead of events viewed as atoms, related to each other only by a God-driven but otherwise inexplicable regularity, we have a more holistic conception of the course of nature. First we see that just as in language the meaning of one utterance is dependent upon the meanings of others, so that no one could know the meaning of this utterance alone, similarly in the natural world our understanding of the changes we perceive is only possible if we relate them to other parts of the system, without which they could not be as they are, that is, mean what they do. Second, there is now a good sense in which there are necessary connections between natural events. The world is supposed to contain within it relations of the sort that utterances in a language can bear to each other, and these include entailment. The general idea is that the clouds mean that rain will come, and the rain means that the clouds were there. If you know this language, and you know that the clouds are there, you know that it will rain. It must rain, because the clouds could not have been as they were, i.e. meant what they did, unless the rain was to come. So there will be tight, necessary relations between individual events.

Of course the whole system is still in a sense arbitrary, being the result of God's choice. But we should distinguish between the arbitrariness of the system and the contingency of such relationships as the system makes possible. A language is an arbitrary system in the relevant sense; there is no reason why English words should mean what they do. But, given what they mean (a matter which we learn from experience) there are non-contingent relationships between distinct utterances. Berkeley seems to be making just this point, though within a syntactic framework, in the *New Theory of Vision* when he says (sec. 143):

It is indeed arbitrary that, in general, letters of any language represent sound at all; but when that has been agreed, it is not arbitrary what combination of letters shall represent this or that particular sound. I leave this with the reader to pursue, and apply it in his own thoughts.

This is all that Berkeley needs in order to claim for science as he sees it the same advantages as the mechanists could claim for science as they saw it. And it gives us a new sense for the passage at *Principles* 106, which I quoted earlier. Instead of meaning that the only necessity is that God's will be done, it can now be taken as saying that there are no necessities in the world except those which exist by the

will of God. The phrase 'there is nothing necessary or essential in the case, but it depends entirely on the will of the governing spirit' should be read rather as Locke's famous phrase when he said that secondary qualities are nothing in the objects themselves but powers. Just as Locke means that secondary qualities are in the objects themselves, but only as powers, Berkeley in fact means that there is something necessary or essential in the case but the only such necessities are ones established by God's choice of language.

So far, then, I see considerable advantages in moving from a conception of signs as natural signs which only have natural meaning to a conception of them as non-natural signs which enjoy non-natural meaning.⁴ But this move still embroils us in difficulties, and unfortunately these are ones which derive largely from the use of Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural and from the way we intuitively conceive of the non-natural. We conceive of events that have non-natural meanings as having them in addition to their natural properties. No event, we would say, could have only the properties of non-natural significance. Any non-naturally significant event must have a set of non-significant properties, in virtue of which it counts as a natural event at all; and its properties of significance supervene on that non-significant layer. Human practice and rule-governed behavior superimposes a level of non-natural significance onto an event that is in itself merely an insignificant natural change - a series of noises or marks. The event could have had its natural properties without having any non-natural ones at all, too. So the approach via Grice's distinction yields no reduction of natural events to utterances of God's. Each natural event has a non-natural meaning, perhaps, but it is not that meaning. The natural realm goes on as before, untouched by the added dimension of meaning constituted by God's Gricean intentions.

Why is this a defect? The straightforward answer is that if we allow a two-layered theory of this sort, we reintroduce all the difficulties which the semantic turn promised to resolve in the philosophy of science. After all, events that have a Gricean non-natural meaning will have a quite independent physical nature. Two events may share a non-natural meaning but be quite different physically; think of the event of the phone ringing and that of someone saying, 'Someone is calling us'. So even if one purpose of science was to decode the meanings of the natural events around us, another must be to come to understand the physical natures of those events conceived of as non-significant natural changes. But this simply reintroduces the conception of science that gave Berkeley his problems. It makes it hard for him to show how scientific knowledge is possible (the semantic turn being no help here) and it deprives him of the account of scientific explanation which provided within his approach everything that the realists could claim for their conception of science and more.

The only way to make Berkeley's position coherent is to abandon Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meaning, with which we have been working so far. Both sides of that distinction represent ways of understanding what it is for something to be a sign which Berkeley needs to reject. In particular, the idea that every natural event has both semantic and non-semantic properties needs to go. All properties of the event must be seen as semantic, without exception. Up till now we have taken a view of language and tried to understand the science of nature in terms of that view, seeing natural events as containing

the twin layers of semantic and non-semantic properties which we attribute to a human utterance. This has failed, and what we need to do is to reverse the direction we have been moving in. We need to understand language in terms of a natural significance which we attribute to natural events and objects. Just as God created leaves and rocks which are utterances and do have something to tell us, so we can create utterances of our own which carry significance in the same sort of way.

This new approach, which denies the idea that natural events have two layers, one inert and non-significant, one active and significant, seems strange to us. But it would not have seemed so strange to Berkeley. The idea he is denying, and which comes so naturally to us, is an integral part of the philosophical picture of the world that is his main target. This picture is certainly not due solely to Descartes, but we call it Cartesian because of the power with which Descartes expressed it. Its central feature is the extreme degree of independence which it ascribes to our world, conceived in a restricted way. Natural objects exist with their primary qualities in a way that is entirely independent of any relation to perceiving minds. Berkeley denied that we could even make sense of a degree of independence as extreme as that. His real things were independent only of our awareness of them, not of all awareness.

Associated with the extreme form of independence that Berkeley rejected was the idea which I can best express by saying that the natural world is intrinsically inert. The inertness of the world can be conceived in two ways, according to the Berkeleyian (and Cartesian) distinction of the operations of the mind into those of the understanding and those of the will. A world which is inert to the understanding is one which of itself contains no significance or meaning. Significance, if it exists, is something absent from the independent world. Where it exists, it is not proper to that world but consists in an added relation to a mind. When we find that significance in an event, this is either our gift to an event which did not have it before or else our recognition that some other mind has bestowed a significance on it by an act of will. Equally, a world which is inert to the will is one which of itself contains nothing important or relevant to action and choice. What is important in the world, what stands as a reason for action, is only so because of a relation to a Cartesian will conceived as a free and undetermined chooser. When we find an event important, this is either our gift to it or else our recognition that another mind (God's, this time) has bestowed an importance on it which is distinct from and alien to its own nature. Nothing matters but thinking and choosing makes it so.

In my view Berkeley's doctrine of signs (his account of natural science), when properly worked out, is yet a further aspect of his rejection of the realists' extreme conception of the world as existing independent of any relation to the mind. His real world is less independent than that and accordingly far richer in natural properties than the realists' is. It contains, as we know, secondary properties conceived of non-dispositionally. And it contains, indeed consists of, properties of significance and importance which the realists could not allow. This richer conception of the world was an earlier conception against which the Cartesian tradition was a rebellion. According to that earlier conception, there are two books, both of which are authored by God. The first is the Bible; the second is the natural world.⁵ It is not that there is the natural world and in addition a

book about that world. The natural world is itself a book and science is our best method of reading it. What I am arguing here is that Berkeley was in this respect trying to put the clock back. His world is not independent of the mind, and it is not inert. It is a readable book that consists entirely of meanings.

It is often said that Berkeley accepts the Cartesian concept of mind and the Cartesian concept of matter and argues from this that there could be no matter of that sort and hence that everything is either a mind or the content of a mind. But if what I have been arguing is true, this remark is wrong on both counts. Berkeley is as keen to reject the Cartesian concept of a self-sufficient, self-aware, and autonomous self, distributing or finding significance and importance around it by its own choices or those of others, as he is to reject the Cartesian conception of the material world as inertly waiting for us to infuse it with the significance and importance it lacks for itself. So the Berkeleian mind is not the Cartesian mind. This should make it less surprising that Berkeleian matter is not Cartesian matter. The intrinsic significance Berkeley finds in the world could only be there if our minds were not Cartesian.

This is as it should be. The tight internal connections between Descartes' conception of matter and his conception of mind render it very hard to abandon one while accepting the other. Like all good theories, it comes as a package deal. On my account, Berkeley is well aware of this and knows that his conception of mind needs to change if his conception of matter does.

This thought prompts new reflection on Berkeley's conception of human action, which is obviously a crucial interface. The problems standardly recognized as facing him here are those of reconciling the thought that we bear the primary responsibility for our actions with his claim that real things are ideas caused by God.⁶ The more clearly we establish our own authorship and responsibility, the less it seems that our actions are real parts of the world at all. The question is whether the conception of the movements of our bodies as utterances of God's helps at all in this quandary. Up till now we have been supposing that the language which is nature is one which God speaks and scientists understand. But if any natural events are our doing, presumably in them we are speaking - and speaking with God, if the natural events are to be real. I am uncertain quite what to make of this possibility. The general line is that to act is to talk with God (not to God), but this could be understood in various ways. One way is to say that in human action there are two simultaneous utterances, one of God's and one of ours. But this will not serve Berkeley's purposes here, since our utterance conceived of as a distinct act would face all the original problems about not being a real thing. It would not improve matters here to say that in action God says what we say because we say it. The hope would be that on this account the primary cause of action is our will and the immediate cause is God's will; in this way we might try to have it that we are responsible for something real. But there is a further difficulty for this line, quite apart from the fact that it still seems to suppose there will be two utterances. This is that it looks like a form of Occasionalism, which Berkeley is very keen to avoid.⁷ Our utterance would be the occasion for a (simultaneous) one of God's in a way which really leaves all the agency in God's hands. So the best way of using the thought that to act is to talk with God is to think of action as joint utterance - a corporate or social act, as it were. These actions are real things which

neither of us can do alone (like jointly lifting the stone). They are real because they are less dependent on us than are the products of our imagination. This is all that is required because Berkeley's official formulations always speak of real things being 'less dependent' on us rather than 'completely independent' of us.⁸ We bear the responsibility for them because, though God's help and connivance was necessary, he helped because we wanted. So at the worst agency is shared, but the primary responsibility is ours, not God's.

In this way human action is seen as an utterance which could not have taken place without the combined choice of created and uncreated spirits. Without our choice, no action could have happened at all (or, if you like, no human action: all would have been pure divine utterance); and without our choice, the change which the action introduces or is would not have occurred, since God would not have done it on his own. Without God's choice, the event could not have happened at all, and so *fortiori* would not have been done. The action is conceived, therefore, as a joint statement which neither party could have made (as such) on their own authority, and which introduces a change which one party could not have caused unaided and which the other party would not have done. The asymmetry in the relationship is what we must appeal to if we are to show that it is we who bear the blame for any wrong-doing, even if God is somehow complicit in what we do.

But even if this is the right way to move to meet the difficulties that threaten Berkeley's theory of action, we might ask what has been gained here by the semantic turn and the attempt to see action as joint utterance rather than simply as joint action. Surely, one might say, the crucial move in what has been said is the move from single to joint action rather than the move from action to speech. There is a fair point here. Perhaps recent discussions of Berkeley's theory of action have failed to consider the possibility of joint action. But the semantic turn does offer one advantage which I consider important. This is that with it we gain a new sense that the action itself lies in the natural world. An action is a natural event that has no properties of a type peculiar to itself; it shares all its salient properties with other natural changes. The only difference is that the agency here is double rather than single. In this way the distinction between action and event is diminished.

I do not think that it would be inconsistent with this approach to admit that, though the utterance is a joint action, the meaning which it bears (or I should say is) is double. God's meaning may be quite different from our meaning, and indeed may contradict it. Suppose that I mean to press one of the two buttons before me, the red one or the black one: in fact I mean to press the black one, but by mistake I press the red one. If this mistake is nonetheless to be conceived of as a joint or corporate action, it seems we have to say that God's meaning here is quite other than my meaning. My meaning is that the missiles will be de-activated (or whatever): God's meaning is that they will be fired.

If all event is utterance and all action is utterance, we should be able to derive from our models of event and action the rudiments of an account of human linguistic action -- of speech-acts. I don't have space to do this here - only to make a couple of remarks about the project. It would involve reversing the normal direction of explanation. Instead of trying to understand significance in nature on

the model of significance in speech, we try to understand significance in speech on the model of that in nature. We already have a two-meaning conception of human action, and the obvious move is simply to copy this for speech-action. To do this would be to see the sounds or signs we make as significant in the same sort of way that the movements of our bodies are. None of the characteristics thought distinctive of speech-acts will be so; all will already be found in the natural world.

This at least is the sort of way in which Berkeley could use the semantic approach to write a more consistent philosophy of action.

There is another notorious crux in Berkeleian philosophy which acquires a new shape from the perspective I have been urging here. This is the problem of the Creation, as described in the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. God is there said to have made the world before he made any created spirits to perceive it, and the question is what possible change could have occurred, on Berkeleian principles, when the world was made. We still have God and his plethora of ideas, but nothing new seems to be able to happen until there are some created minds to share some of those ideas (the ones which are the real things). A phenomenalist solution to this puzzle is possible - indeed Berkeley toys with one⁹ - but in my view phenomenism is incompatible with the general thrust of Berkeley's approach,¹⁰ and so I leave that aside. Is there any other option available? The semantic turn opens up the idea that when the world is created God begins to speak a language for which he has not yet created an audience. There is one difficulty with this which I think we should discount immediately, namely the thought that God does not change or exist in time. To the extent that I understand this thought at all, it seems to create difficulties for any version of the Hebraic account of the Creation: so I leave it aside. But at the moment I see no other problems for the resolution I am proposing here. It may seem artificial, but nonetheless it is a natural consequence of the semantic approach.

I end with a disclaimer. I said earlier that Berkeley succeeds in hiding from himself the importance of his conception of natural events as signs. As a result of this, there is nothing approaching a worked-out version of the theory in his writings. What I have done is to take the very few remarks that there are on this subject in Part 1 of the *Principles*, and develop them in the only way in which they could run if they are to provide what Berkeley needs from them. It must be admitted that, for reasons which I am unable to reconstruct, even for the second edition of the *Principles* Berkeley watered down the remarks which introduce the semantic turn. And certainly later treatments of these matters in the *De Motu*, *Alciphron* and *Siris* never give the linguistic analogy quite the importance which, if I am right about its real fruitfulness, they could have done; though Berkeley's continual harping on the theme that nature is a divine language is evidence that he saw more in the linguistic analogy than I think could be explained on the regularity interpretation of his philosophy of science. Nonetheless the approach I have developed seems to me coherent and attractive and to the extent that it relies on a non-Cartesian conception of the mind as well as a non-Cartesian conception of matter, it is working with themes that might have been intended for the ill-fated Part 2 of the *Principles*.

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Notes

¹This paper continues a theme first adumbrated in my *Berkeley: an Introduction* (Blackwell: Oxford 1987); it contains some changes of mind.

²The best evidence that this stronger view is the one Berkeley really wants to push is in *Principles* 22.

³See my *Berkeley* pp 152-153.

⁴I mention some further advantages on pp. 118-19 of my *Berkeley*.

⁵For early signs of this picture see *Psalms* 19, which starts: 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge'. For very recent signs of the idea that the world consists basically of elements of speech, thought or utterances see the views of T. Sider (2011) and K. Fine (2001); one might say that for Fine, the basic elements are propositions, and for Sider they are parts of propositions (or perhaps of sentences).

⁶See Taylor, (1985).

⁷See Berkeley's discussion of moral responsibility in the Second Dialogue; I discuss the relation between this and the problem of agency in *Berkeley*, pp. 136-140.

⁸See *Principles* §§ 29 and 33.

⁹See the *Third Dialogue* p. 252.

¹⁰See my *Berkeley* ch. 5, esp. pp. 72-73.

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