

Berkeley, Expressivism, and Pragmatism

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ABSTRACT There is a long-standing dispute among scholars concerning Berkeley's supposed commitment to an emotivist theory of meaning as the very first (and an early modern) instance of non-cognitivism. According to this position, the domains of religious and moral language do not refer to facts about the world, but rather express the emotional attitudes of religious or moral language users. Some scholars involved in the dispute argue for taking Berkeley to be an emotivist (non-cognitivist), while others hold that we should not do so. This paper puts forward an interpretation that lends support to the non-cognitivist reading of his stance, but in expressivist rather than emotivist terms. It argues that the label "expressivism" does more justice to the textual evidence concerning his understanding of moral language, as what is distinctive where this philosopher is concerned is his interest in explaining the nature of our practice of employing moral language (i.e. how we come to formulate moral statements as expressions of our non-referential attitudes, and the meta-level considerations pertaining to morality associated with this), rather than whether morality is just a matter of our emotions or feelings (i.e. such first-order considerations about morality as whether moral rightness and wrongness correspond merely to our emotional states).

KEYWORDS Berkeley; Emotivism; Expressivism; Non-Cognitivism; Pragmatism

George Berkeley is arguably the first modern philosopher to whom, in the context of discussions of religious and moral language, the thesis that “words can be meaningful without informing or standing for ideas” could be plausibly attributed.¹ In his published works, he first expressed such a view in Section 20 of the Introduction to the *Principles* (1710), where he enumerated three additional non-cognitive functions of language: the evoking of emotions, of dispositions, and of actions. He then went on to publicly re-formulate this view in Dialogue VII of *Alciphron* (1732). At the same time, we also find these statements echoed in his unpublished works—notably, the *Notebooks* (referred to here as *Philosophical Commentaries*, this being the standardly accepted title, as used in the edition of Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop) and the *Manuscript Introduction*.

There has been a long-standing dispute among scholars concerning Berkeley’s supposed commitment to an emotivist or, broadly speaking, non-cognitivist theory of meaning.² According to this position, the domains of religious and moral language do not refer to facts about the world, but rather express the emotional attitudes of religious or moral language users. Some scholars involved in the dispute argue for taking Berkeley to be an emotivist (non-cognitivist),³ while others hold that we should

1. See David Berman, “Berkeley’s Semantic Revolution: 19 November 1707–11 January 1708,” *History of European Ideas* 7, no. 6 (1986): 603, doi:10.1016/0191-6599(86)90009-4.

2. For the originators of this discussion, see David Berman, “Cognitive Theology and Emotive Mysteries in Berkeley’s *Alciphron*,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy: Archaeology, Culture, History, Literature* 81C (1981). Geneviève Brykman, *Berkeley: philosophie et apologétique* (Paris: Vrin, 1984), 299–324; Geneviève Brykman, *Berkeley et le voile des mots* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 189–224; Bertil Belfrage, “The Clash on Semantics in Berkeley’s *Notebook A*,” *Hermathena* 139 (1985); Bertil Belfrage, “Berkeley’s theory of emotive meaning (1708),” *History of European Ideas* 7, no. 6 (1986), doi:10.1016/0191-6599(86)90014-8; Bertil Belfrage, “Development of Berkeley’s Early Theory of Meaning,” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 176, no. 3 (1986); Bertil Belfrage, “Editor’s Commentary,” in *George Berkeley’s Manuscript Introduction*, ed. Bertil Belfrage (Oxford: Doxa, 1987); Robert McKim, “The Entries in Berkeley’s *Notebooks*: a reply to Bertil Belfrage,” *Hermathena* 139 (1985); Berman, “Berkeley’s Semantic Revolution”; M. A. Stewart, “Berkeley’s Introduction Draft,” *Berkeley Newsletter* 11 (1986–90); and David Berman, *George Berkeley. Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 144–63. See also John Russell Roberts, “Berkeley on the Philosophy of Language,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley*, eds. Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

3. See, e.g., Berman, “Berkeley’s Semantic Revolution”; Belfrage, “The Clash on Semantics”; Belfrage, “Berkeley’s theory”; Belfrage, “Development”; Bertil Belfrage, “The Theological Positivism of George Berkeley (1707-1708),” *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 83 (2007); Bertil Belfrage, “The Mystery of Goodness in Berkeley’s *Passive Obedience*,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley*, eds. Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Peter J.E. Kail, “Berkeley, the Ends of Language, and the *Principles of Human Knowledge*,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 107 (2007), doi:10.1111/j.1467-9264.2007.00221.x.

not do so.⁴ My own intention here is not to offer a detailed history of the scholarship pertaining to this issue. Instead, this paper puts forward an interpretation that lends support to the non-cognitivist reading of his stance, but in expressivist rather than emotivist terms. Moreover, my focus here will be exclusively on the interpretation of moral language, albeit—as will eventually turn out to be the case—with a religious background in Divine-law ethics.

My view is that the label “expressivism” does more justice to the textual evidence concerning Berkeley’s understanding of moral language, as what is distinctive where this philosopher is concerned is his interest in explaining the nature of our practice of employing moral language (i.e. how we come to formulate moral statements as expressions of our non-referential attitudes, and the meta-level considerations pertaining to morality associated with this), rather than whether morality is just a matter of our emotions or feelings (i.e. such first-order considerations about morality as whether moral rightness and wrongness correspond merely to our emotional states). This distinction correlates quite well, I think, with the contrast between old-fashioned non-cognitivism, in the sense of the emotivism of A.J. Ayer and Charles L. Stevenson,⁵ and the newest form of non-cognitivism—namely, the expressivism of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard.⁶ (We may add, in passing, that it also has the virtue of explaining why Stevenson and Ayer did not invoke Berkeley as a precursor, whereas Blackburn expresses a great deal of sympathy for him.) Moreover, in my

4. See Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); Roomet Jakapi, “Berkeley’s Defence of the Scripture in *Alciphron VI*,” in *Berkeley’s Alciphron: English Text and Essays in Interpretation*, eds. Laurent Jaffro, Genevieve Brykman, and Claire Schwartz (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010); Roomet Jakapi, “Christian Mysteries and Berkeley’s Alleged Non-Cognitivism,” in *Reexamining Berkeley’s Philosophy*, ed. Stephen H. Daniel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Roomet Jakapi, “Entry 720 of Berkeley’s Philosophical Commentaries and ‘Non-Cognitive’ Propositions in Scripture,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 85, no. 1 (2003), doi:10.1515/agph.2003.004; Roomet Jakapi, “Emotive Meaning and Christian Mysteries in Berkeley’s *Alciphron*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 10, no. 3 (2002), doi:10.1080/09608780210143218; Kenneth Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory of Operative Language in the *Manuscript Introduction*,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2003), doi:10.1080/09608780320001047877; and Kenneth L. Pearce, *Language and the Structure of Berkeley’s World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). See also Kenneth L. Pearce, “Berkeley’s Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley*, eds. Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

5. See Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952); Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944).

6. See Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992). See also Kail, “Berkeley.”

opinion, this difference is picked up on implicitly (though never spelt out) by Bertil Belfrage when, in relation to recent controversies, he stresses the thought that Berkeley was concerned primarily with moral language practice, and still sought to preserve the objectivity of morality. As I hope to show in due course, only against the background of an expressivist interpretation of Berkeley of the kind proposed in this paper can such those colliding tendencies make sense.

In what follows, I first present the textual evidence in support of the non-cognitivist, expressivist interpretation of Berkeley, before explaining why it should be differentiated from emotivism and then going on to stress the possibilities for a pragmatic enrichment of his own expressivist approach. In this way, it is hoped that the interpretation proposed will come to possess all the merits of both the non-cognitivist approach and what have come to be known as the “operative language” and “use theory” interpretations.

As far as the latter are concerned, the “operative language” interpretation holds that Berkeley subscribed to a theory of language according to which words such as “good” require an instrumental (operative) language to accomplish a practical end: “The intended end for which an utterance is put to use, i.e. the speaker’s intention in uttering, partially determines the meaning of an expression.”⁷ Meanwhile, the “use theory” of language holds that Berkeley acknowledged both a representational and an “operative” aspect of language. The meaning of words is associated with their rules of usage, and sometimes these rules “connect words to ideas,” while sometimes not.⁸ Both interpretations seem highly plausible. Moreover, they emphasize the crucial pragmatic dimension to Berkeley’s theory of language. The aim of this paper is to supplement these interpretations, as well as the non-cognitive reading of Berkeley, with a possible extension of the interpretative categories involved, where this is to be achieved by appealing to a similarity between Berkeley’s own proposal and contemporary expressivism. The resulting perspective will, it is hoped, prove capable of lending support to the above-mentioned interpretations while also demonstrating the extent of their potential to complement one another. On this reading, in the context of their understanding of moral and religious language, both Berkeley and contemporary expressivists seek to combine non-cognitivism with pragmatism, with the aim of simultaneously preserving both such language’s non-representational character and its objectivity (truth-evaluability). The present article does not therefore set

7. Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 277.

8. See Pearce, *Language*, 62–3.

out to replace or criticize such interpretations, but rather to emphasize the unique significance of this aspect of Berkeley's philosophy of language. A strategy proposed for accomplishing this goal is to look at Berkeley's alleged non-cognitivism through the lens of contemporary expressivism, given that the latter struggles with puzzle strikingly similar to that which Berkeley seems to have been confronted with: namely, how to explain moral and religious language in (at least partially) non-representational terms while preserving its apparent objectivity.

THE NON-COGNITIVIST READING OF BERKELEY'S PHILOSOPHY

Let us turn now to those texts of Berkeley that may be regarded as furnishing the basis for the non-cognitivist interpretation. There are three texts that point most forcefully in this direction: the *Notebooks*, *Manuscript Introduction* and *Alciphron*. It should be observed that there are some occasional notes in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* that also lend a degree of support to it.⁹

Before we engage more closely with the textual evidence, I would like to make some preliminary remarks. Firstly, in my interpretation of the *Notebooks* and *Manuscript Introduction*, I follow closely Bertil Belfrage, trying at the same time to supplement his reading with my own analysis of the *Alciphron*, which has not so far been a major focus of concern for him.¹⁰ Secondly, as regards Berkeley's conception of moral language, we do not have any explicit published textual evidence, as all of his published texts on non-cognitivism refer to religious language. Yet we can refer to his unpublished works, which contain some thoughts on moral language, all the while trying to supplement or clarify their significance with reference to his published statements on religious language. That, at any rate, will be the interpretative approach consistently employed here.

In line with his epistemological anti-representationalism, Berkeley also subscribed to an anti-representationalist conception of language. In that context, the following observation by Belfrage can be regarded as instructive:

Berkeley became convinced that it is misleading to ask: What kind of *things*, or *qualities* of things or actions, do holy mysteries, or value statements, refer to? As statements about mysteries are nonsensical to human understanding, this question cannot be answered. Instead, he asks: How is *language* used by the

9. See Berman, "Cognitive Theology"; "Berkeley's Semantic Revolution"; *George Berkeley*, 144–63; Brykman, *Berkeley*, 299–324; Belfrage, "The Clash on Semantics"; "Berkeley's theory"; "Development"; Kail, "Berkeley."

10. See Belfrage, "The Clash on Semantics"; "Berkeley's theory"; "Development"; "Editor's Commentary"; "The Theological Positivism"; "The Mystery of Goodness."

apostle, for instance, when he speaks about the mystery of the afterlife, or by us, when we pronounce our value statements? The answer in the *Manuscript Introduction* is that the speaker intends “nothing more than barely to excite in the hearer certain Emotions without any thought of those Ideas so much talk’d of and so little understood”—with the end in view to make the hearer perform certain acts.¹¹

According to the *Manuscript Introduction*, St. Paul’s promise is void of descriptive or representational meaning: “We are told [by the Inspir’d Writer] that the Good Things which God hath prepared for them that love him are such as Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard nor hath it enter’d into the Heart of Man to conceive.”¹² For Berkeley, St. Paul was not intending here to offer a representation or description of unknown facts. Berkeley notes: “Who is there that can say [these Words] bring into his Mind clear and determinate Ideas or in Truth any Ideas at all.”¹³ St. Paul’s intention was obviously different. According to Berkeley, he uttered the words about unknown “Good Things” in order to “make [hearers] more cheerful and fervent in their Duty.”¹⁴

In other words, as rightly stated by Belfrage, “the apostle used language non-referentially with the end in view to excite people to perform certain actions.”¹⁵ On this reading, although the promise of “Good Things” takes the *form* of plain description, it is nonetheless used to convey the speaker’s prescription, which is that it is the hearer’s duty to act according to Christian doctrine.¹⁶ This is instructive, as it can help us by analogy to understand whatever tenets define Berkeley’s approach towards moral language.

11. Belfrage, “The Theological Positivism,” 50. See George Berkeley, *George Berkeley’s Manuscript Introduction*, ed., Bertil Belfrage (Oxford: Doxa, 1987), 41–3; Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 296–7; Roberts, “Berkeley,” 432–4. Almost all references to Berkeley’s works made here are to the edition by Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, 9 vols., (London: Nelson, 1948–57), with the exception of references to the *Manuscript Introduction*. Besides the *Commentaries* (which I quote using NB as an abbreviation for *Notebooks* in the main text and the Luce-Jessop title of *Philosophical Commentaries* in the footnotes), as well as *Principles*, *Passive Obedience*, *De Motu*, and *Siris* (quoted by sections), *Alciphron* (quoted by dialogue and section number), and Locke’s *Essays* (which I quote by book, chapter and section number), all other quotations are by page number. References to Berkeley’s *Manuscript Introduction* are to Belfrage’s diplomatic edition and are also by page number.

12. Berkeley, *Manuscript Introduction*, 36.

13. *Ibid.*, 36, 36a.

14. *Ibid.*, 36.

15. Belfrage, “The Theological Positivism,” 48.

16. See Berman, *George Berkeley*, 148; John Russell Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob. The Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 62–5; Jakapi, “Christian Mysteries.”

Referring to evaluative statements, Berkeley writes the following in the *Manuscript Introduction*:

I ask any Man whether every time he tells another that Such an Action is Honourable and Vertuous ... his be not the full and only Purpose, namely, that those Words should excite in the Mind of the Hearer an esteem of that particular Action, and stir him up to the performance of it?¹⁷

In this case, too, we have language that appears to be descriptive or representational at the level of surface grammar, but where users are not in fact operating with any referential or representational meanings pertaining to “honorable and virtuous actions” in and of themselves. The “full and only Purpose” of the speaker who utters a sentence to the effect that “Such an action is Honourable and Vertuous” is to assent to the goodness of this action and engender a similar stance on the part of the hearer, thus causally engendering a performance of the action in question.¹⁸

This ostensibly assertoric dimension to our use of the predicate “good” is emphasized in *Notebook A*, where Berkeley discusses both the theory of assertion (labelled by him as his “doctrine of certainty”¹⁹) and moral philosophy (marked by him there with the note “Mo” for “Moral Philosophy”).

On his account of assertion, language users cannot express certainty “without affirmation or negation”—that is, without adhering to the rules governing assertion. Introducing this rule-following element, Berkeley suggests that meaning comes about when language users *use* words (signs) in

17. Berkeley, *Manuscript Introduction*, 41–41b (first stratum).

18. See Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 289. As rightly noted by one of the anonymous referees of this paper, such a formulation could raise the question of “how a statement [could] exhort to the performance of an action without antecedently representing this action at all.” In other words, in such circumstances, “one would not know what kind of action is to be performed.” This is exactly the reason why the expressivist theory of meaning is not sufficient to explain what Berkeley meant. We need to draw on pragmatism to supplement this. The quasi-referential character of the statement can only exhort persons to the performance of an action if it is constructed in line with the linguistic practice of language users who adhere to the rules of the language community the user belongs to. This practice enables the user to refer, or quasi-refer, to things by means of words, even where there is no observable correlation. For Berkeley, the Christian community was a community of Biblical language users who, through the practice of reading and commentary, arrived at such quasi-referential meanings for its words. This element will be further outlined here in due course, using the idea of a so-called “pragmatic mediation” of semantic relations.

19. See George Berkeley, “Philosophical Commentaries,” in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 1 (London: Nelson, 1948), entries 731, 753, 777, 809.

a certain way, following the rules of assertion (affirmation or negation).²⁰ There are no ready-made “meanings” existing prior to the introduction of language, which awaits the assigning of symbols to words.²¹ Quite the opposite: words can *be significant*, despite *not signifying anything*.²²

Descriptive statements, such as “the horse is white,” are true or false in virtue of an affirmation of some “mental proposition.” However, for Berkeley (unlike Locke), we can imagine a “blue horse”—even if there is no such animal and, in consequence, we are unable to form the corresponding “mental proposition.” In both cases, the surface of language suggests a referential character for our statements, though in the second case we cannot affirm the truth or falsity of the statement in question. How is this possible? Well, it is so because our semantic or referential relations (as in the paradigmatic case—namely, that of truth) are pragmatically mediated: we can have access to the relevant semantic relations only through the practice of language users, and this practice is itself exhibited in their assertions—i.e. in their acceptance or rejection of the particular vocabulary employed. Such quasi-representational usage of language by language users is a part of their linguistic practice. (I hope to explain this in more detail in the context of the reading of *Alciphron* that will be presented here in due course.)

THE PRAGMATIC DIMENSION OF BERKELEY’S NON-COGNITIVE EXPRESSIVISM

In order to shed some light at this stage on what such pragmatic mediation could amount to, let us now turn to the case of moral language. When we take moral statements in the context of their assertion, an obvious question arises: if they, too, are not referential or descriptive, what is the basis for their being asserted? Or, in other words, what is the criterion for asserting that some action is good, and some other bad? To answer this question, I propose that we consider the entries in *Notebook A* devoted to moral philosophy. Berkeley focuses there on Locke’s account of “moral actions” in his *Essay* (2.28.13–16). Following Belfrage,²³ we can note several points here. According to Locke, in the case of the sentence “A murder is a bad

20. See George Berkeley, “De Motu,” in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 4 (London: Nelson, 1951), 36–9; George Berkeley, “Alciphron; or The Minute Philosopher,” in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 3 (London: Nelson, 1950), 7.11 and 7.14.

21. See Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 280; Pearce, *Language*, 139–57.

22. See Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.17; Roberts, “Berkeley,” 432–3.

23. See Belfrage, “The Theological Positivism,” 37–52; Belfrage, “The Mystery of Goodness,” 141–57.

action” we can describe what we mean by “murder,” but have a problem with the referential description of the moral quality of being “Good, Bad, or Indifferent” as no “mental proposition” or idea of this quality appears in the description. Instead, for Locke, what we are doing here is assessing actions as good or bad according to “their conformity to, or disagreement with some rule that makes them to be regular or irregular, Good or Bad.”²⁴ As noted by Belfrage, “it is against this background that Berkeley writes in his notebook: ‘We have no Ideas of Vertues & Vices, no Ideas of Moral Actions’ (NB, 669, 809).”²⁵

In seeking to clarify here the pragmatic mediation of semantic relations, we may suppose that the non-referential quality of goodness that pertains to a given moral action gains its quasi-referential meaning only with reference to some moral rule or law that enables the language user to assert this quality. In other words, rules relating to a given language—that in our present case can also be characterized as manifesting moral norms or laws—make the surface of the linguistic practice appear to be referential or descriptive, even though this is not in fact the case.²⁶ So it seems that what we have here is, indeed, the first attempt to formulate the so-called “use theory” of meaning,²⁷ according to which (1) use is somehow held to be explanatorily prior to meaning, (2) the uses of expressions may be characterized in broadly functional terms, as roles performed by expressions in the contexts of linguistic practices, (3) the dominance of pragmatics over semantics does not necessarily reduce semantics wholly to pragmatics, but the latter is, nevertheless, entirely subordinate to the former in explanatory terms (there being no possible explanation of ties between meanings and expressions without invoking the uses of the latter—i.e. without some practice or set of dispositions imparting particular meanings to the lexical items in question), and (4) linguistic usage consists in both some such practice and such dispositions, construed in either collectivistic or individualistic terms as enabling particular expressions to acquire specific meanings. Now I would not like to overstate the extent of Berkeley’s self-awareness concerning the theory implied by his approach here. Yet it seems charitable to say that

24. See John Locke, *Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, ed., Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.28.13–16.

25. Belfrage, “The Theological Positivism,” 49.

26. See Berkeley, “An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision,” 231. See George Berkeley, “An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision”, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. 1 (London: Nelson 1948), 231; Berkeley, *Manuscript Introduction*, 111; Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.7 and 7.14.

27. For further analysis of the use theory, see the highly detailed and informative interpretation of K. L. Pearce (*Language, passim*, esp. 62–63). See also Roberts, “Berkeley,” 432–4.

he did have these expressivist, anti-representationalist (minimalist) and pragmatic intuitions when working on his philosophy in *Notebook A* and the *Manuscript Introduction*. At least, some basis for this interpretation is furnished by the “solitary man” thought experiment that we find noted down in the former text and described more extensively in the latter one.

In the *Manuscript Introduction*, Berkeley assigns a quite definitive role to the “solitary man” thought experiment in the context of his reflections on language, writing the following:

Let us conceive a Solitary Man, one born and bred in such a place of the World, and in such Circumstances, as he shall never have had Occasion to make use of Universal signs for his ideas. That man shall have a constant train of Particular Ideas passing in his Mind. Whatever he sees, hears, imagines, or any wise conceives is on all hands, even by the Patrons of Abstract Ideas, granted to be particular.

Let us withal suppose him under no Necessity of labouring to secure himself from Hunger and Cold: But at full Ease, naturally of good Facultys [and] Contemplative. Such a one I should take to be nearer the Discovery of certain Great and Excellent Truths yet unknow, than he that has had the Education of the Schools, and by much reading and Converation has [furnish'd his Head] attain'd to the Knowledge of Those Arts and Sciences, that make so great a Noise in the World.

It is true, the Knowledge of Our Solitary Philosopher is not like to be so very wide and extended, it being confin'd to those few Particulars that come within his own observation. But then, if he is like to have less Knowledge, he is withal like to have fewer Mistakes than Other Men.... I shall therefore endeavour so far as I am able to take of the mask of Words, and obtain a naked view of my own Particular Ideas, from which I may expect to derive the following Advantages. First, I shall be sure to get clear of all Controversies purely verbal.... Secondly, 'tis reasonable to expect that by this way the Trouble of sounding, or examining, or comprehending any Notion may be very much abridg'd.... Thirdly, I shall have fewer Objects to consider, than other Men seem to have had.... Fourthly. Having remov'd the Veil of Words, I may expect to have a clearer prospect of the Ideas, that remain in my Understanding. Fifthly. This seemeth to be a sure way to extricate myself out of that fine and subtile Net of Abstract Ideas; Which has so miserably perplex'd, and entangled the Minds of Men.... Sixthly. So long as I confine my thoughts to my own Ideas divested of Words, I do not see how I can easily be mistaken.... But the

Attainment of all these Advantages does presuppose an entire deliverance from the Deception of Words, which I dare scarce promise myself. So difficult a thing it is, to dissolve a Union so early begun, and confirm'd by so long a Habit, as that betwixt Words and Ideas.... Those obstacles being now remov'd I earnestly desire that everyone would use his utmost Endeavours to attain a clear and naked view of the Ideas He would consider, by Separating from them all that Varnish and Mist of Words, which so fatally blinds the Judgment, and dissipates the Attention of Men.... Unless we take care to clear the first Principles of Knowledge from the incumbrance & delusion of Words, We may make infinite Reasonings upon them to no purpose.²⁸

For Berkeley, then, to define precise meanings for words is to give a pragmatic procedure for verification in terms of what might be called a “source experience”: i.e. an experience not mediated by any means of representation (be it cognitive or linguistic). This experience, disclosed via the linguistic practice of the solitary man, reveals how words are embodied in the world. The source (i.e. some practically verified experience or other) is the most basic evidence which could be given to the human senses, as it constitutes an immediate knowledge of things as they are, without any interposing of a veil of ideas, or even of words themselves. It seems that the “solitary man” thought experiment was designed as a pragmatic, anti-representationalist tool, inasmuch as it spoke directly against any strictly representationalist conception of language of the sort Berkeley took to be supported, in turn, by representationalist theories of perception.

The “solitary man” thought experiment might be treated as an attempt on Berkeley’s part to build a pragmatic method for the verification of language, in order to combine its non-referential character and its status as objective. As we shall see in due course, in Section 37 of the *Manuscript Introduction* he considers, with a view to arriving at a fuller explanatory account of this pragmatic element, how children acquire language. Put briefly, a child grasps the meaning of the word “reward” by participating in the linguistic practice where it is used: its meaning is then its usage for the child. Through linguistic practice, the child builds a semantic quasi-reference between the word used and an experienced state of the world. In this way, the child arrives via the pragmatic level (i.e. the language users’ specific practice) at the semantic level, in the form of a truth-evaluable characterization of the world (i.e. the quasi-reference of the word “reward”). In other words, the

28. Berkeley, *Manuscript Introduction*, 115–25. See also Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 296–7.

semantic (truth-evaluable) level is a pragmatically (non-representationally) mediated one.

As I see it, for Berkeley, a pragmatic enrichment of expressivism concerning moral language along the lines outlined above offered an attractive starting point. In this way, he might save the expressive character of moral language and at the same time preserve the objective status of morality. Indeed, just such a maneuver is exhibited in *Passive Obedience*, where we see him attempting to promote morality and the “well-being of Mankind” by drawing on, and endorsing submission to, moral rules justified in turn by an appeal to Divine Laws.²⁹

To substantiate this interpretation, let us now turn to *Alciphron*, where doing so will hopefully serve to make clear the direction of Berkeley’s philosophy development inasmuch as this text exhibits his intuition regarding a fruitful collaboration between expressivism and pragmatism in the context of a descriptive account of the non-cognitive character of language. While *Alciphron* focuses on religious language, its considerations may be taken—at least for heuristic purposes—to apply equally well to the case of moral language.

THE EXPRESSIVIST READING OF BERKELEY’S *ALCIPHRON*

In *Alciphron*, Berkeley examines what other uses could be attributed to words besides communicating or referring to ideas. In this work, Euphranor (a proxy for Berkeley himself) seeks to “inquire what it [i.e. the usage of words] is; and see if we can make sense of our daily practice.”³⁰ In other words, he aims to provide an explanation of our linguistic practice.³¹

Euphranor suggests that words are a type of sign system, and may be considered analogous to other such systems: for example, counters or arithmetical calculations.³² Counters are used “not for their own sake, but only

29. See George Berkeley, “Passive Obedience,” in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 6 (London: Nelson, 1953), 9–10. See Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy*, 130–53.

30. Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.8. For the historical context for this work, see Adam Grzeliński, “Alciphron; or the Minute Philosopher: Berkeley’s Redefinition of Free-Thinking,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley*, eds. Bertil Belfrage and Richard Brook (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

31. See Roberts, “Berkeley,” 433.

32. The use of the term “sign system,” and the emphasis on rules of use within a linguistic community, are characteristic of Kenneth Pearce’s interpretation (see Pearce, *Language*, 62), which I consider both a plausible and a useful one. For the purposes of the present paper I shall adopt this expression, and to some extent also this author’s approach, over the course of this section.

as signs substituted for money, as words are for ideas,” and “the players at first agree on their respective values, and at last substitute those values in their stead.”³³ Meanwhile, in arithmetic calculations “the figures stand for pounds, shillings, and pence.” In other words, “it will suffice if in the conclusion those figures direct our actions with respect to things.”³⁴

Applying these examples to words construed as a sign system, Euphranor notes that “words may not be insignificant, although they should not, every time they are used, excite the ideas they signify in our minds, it being sufficient, that we have it in our power to substitute things or ideas for their signs when there is occasion.”³⁵ Moreover, “there may be another use of words, besides that of marking or suggesting distinct ideas, to wit, the influencing our conduct and actions.” This process of influencing may be brought about either by forming rules for us to act on, or by promoting certain passions, dispositions and emotions in our minds. Therefore, a discourse that directs us how to act (i.e. prompts our execution of or forbearance from some given course of action) may, it seems, be useful and significant, even if the individual words from which it is composed do not each of them bring a distinct idea into our minds.³⁶ Certain linguistic rules, then, can be seen as providing explicit instructions for language users or participants in a linguistic practice, who are put into an affective state from which some action or other may then issue. Words can be meaningful without possessing any cognitively determined referent, and it will be the linguistic community that determines their usage.³⁷

Euphranor concludes his position by saying that “although terms are 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,” and that “the mind of man may assent to propositions containing such terms.”³⁸ Berkeley seems to have in mind here a “verbal proposition”—i.e. a sentence, not a “mental proposition” in the sense of a mere idea. Moreover, his position here is that such assent or assertion can only occur when the mind is “directed or affected by the words in the intended manner.”

33. Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.8.

34. Ibid. See Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 280.

35. Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.8.

36. Ibid.

37. See Williford, “Berkeley’s Theory,” 277–80; Pearce, *Language*, 76–8; and Roberts, “Berkeley,” 432–3.

38. Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.11.

MORAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In the context of the above rules of assertion enabling language users to assent to sentences, it may be interesting to look at the one single example where Berkeley actually sets out to describe how a language user acquires the meaning of a word. In Section 37 of the *Manuscript Introduction*, discussing how someone acquires the meaning of the word “reward,” Berkeley writes:

When he was a Child he had frequently heard those Words used to him to create in him an obedience to the Commands of those that spoke them. And as he grew up he has found by experience that upon the mentioning of those Words by an honest Man it has been his Interest to have doubled his Zeal and Activity for the service of that Person. Thus there having grown up in his Mind a Customary Connexion betwixt the hearing that Proposition and being dispos'd to obey with chearfulness the Injunctions that accompany it.³⁹

What is striking here is that this is, undoubtedly, a pragmatically grounded account of the process of language acquisition. Language users do not learn the meanings of concrete words by pointing to the relevant referential objects. Rather, they learn how to deploy the proper meanings of those words by first following linguistic rules, where such rules can themselves only be comprehended or learned through being implemented in practice. In other words, they can only acquire those meanings by following the linguistic practice of the community they belong to. It is in this pragmatically motivated way that we can arrive at a quasi-referential meaning even when there is no referent for it.⁴⁰

One tenet of the above passage from the *Manuscript Introduction* substantiated still further at the end of the Seventh Dialogue of *Alciphron*, where Berkeley suggests that certain particular uses of language by free-thinkers may engender a form of moral misperception in society. Interestingly, in this instance he invokes Aristotelian moral psychology, which itself emphasizes a lack of a direct reference on the part of moral language to facts, and with this the need for moral education in the form of a virtue ethics.⁴¹

Two elements would appear to be essential here. First, both in the *Manuscript Introduction* example and when invoking Aristotelian moral psychology in *Alciphron*, Berkeley emphasizes the public dimension of moral

39. Berkeley, *Manuscript Introduction*, 37.

40. See Pearce, *Language*, 59–60.

41. See Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.26 and 7.31.

language use, together with its role in making moral categories accessible to language users. Second, in both works Berkeley exhibits a genealogical approach when seeking to explaining moral language acquisition—something that is also a distinctive feature of contemporary expressivism (e.g. Blackburn), but not where traditional emotivism is concerned (e.g. Ayer). When Berkeley and contemporary expressivists endeavour to explain specific forms of moral conduct in a society, both refer to its practice and, more specifically, to a historical explication of its acquisition in terms of such practice at the level of public language. It is the language user who acquires moral categories through their use—doing so by virtue of their participation in the linguistic life of the community. We learn how to employ particular moral categories only through a social context we have been introduced to by our parents or educators, inasmuch as we have been brought up to follow their practice. Such a genealogical explanation helps us to understand why we are engaging in just this particular form of moral conduct. As both *Aciphron* and *Passive Obedience* suggest, the moral system is good for human beings if it helps them to flourish (i.e. furthers the “well-being of Mankind”). The Divine laws revealed in the Bible help human beings to flourish, and this is the reason why the Christian community is instrumental in introducing their members to moral conduct that is good for them. In other words, the referential or representational character of our language (i.e. the semantic level of relations between words and their designata) emerges as a consequence of our taking part in a specific linguistic practice carried on by the community we belong to (i.e. the pragmatic level of relations between language users and their utterances). Following the practices of our linguistic community, we learn how to combine words with particular actions, and even if there is no referent for the former, we grasp their meaning by establishing a quasi-referent—something we are able to do in virtue of participating in this practice. Moral values lacking any specific reference in and of themselves might be construable as expressions of attitudes, but their objectivity remains grounded in our belonging to a community guided by the Divine laws revealed in the Bible. Here we may also invoke a Berkeleyian metaphor: namely, that of the language of nature through which God speaks to us. We can assume that what Berkeley had in mind was that the linguistic community we participate in contains both finite beings and God as the lawgiver. In that way, moral language could be considered an expression of attitudes when viewed from our human perspective, but still count as morally objective inasmuch as it is grounded in the Divine laws.⁴²

42. See Berkeley, “Passive Obedience,” 9–10.

EMOTIVISM AND EXPRESSIVISM

It is therefore plausible to regard Berkeley as being a moral non-cognitivist, but not in the old-fashioned sense of an emotivist who seeks to reduce moral discourse to expressions of emotion. Berkeley, it must be said, has much greater affinities with contemporary expressivism.⁴³ According to the latter, which is most clearly exemplified by Simon Blackburn, the task of explicating moral language is essentially that of providing a way of speaking “in different terms of what is done by so talking.” In other words, its aim is to reveal the morally significant linguistic practice associated with some particular moral domain of language, and it should not be concerned with understanding that same practice globally—i.e. outside of the specific language domain in question. This local domain of linguistic practice might be revealed through putting forward a kind of genealogy of the domain, where such a genealogy reconstructs the manner in which the linguistic practice came to be established, and thus also sheds light upon its functional character within this particular domain. Blackburn himself explains the difference between a global and a local approach by referring to the famous Carnapian distinction between internal and external questions.⁴⁴ According to Rudolf Carnap, external questions concern some particular domain of language: in other words, from the perspective of the position of non-cognitivism we are analyzing here, what external questions really seek to establish is a correlation between an expression and its referent. However, such an enterprise is inevitably unsuccessful, as we cannot reach a perspective outside of our “skin”—that is, outside of our own language domain. Therefore, we must stay within the latter, which we do by restricting ourselves to seeking answers to internal questions. However, according to Blackburn, there is also another strategy for approaching external questions. Through a genealogical reconstruction of the external questions’ appearance and function within a given domain of language, we can see how they themselves come to be reflected in some particular linguistic practice, too. In this way, Blackburn views the external questions simply as “practical questions, for which the answer would be given in terms of the benefit of the framework in question.”⁴⁵ Such external questions, then, are indeed answerable, but only through an anti-representationalist, non-cognitive

43. See Kail, “Berkeley,” 265–78.

44. See Rudolf Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology,” in *Meaning and Necessity: A Study in Semantics and Modal Logic*, ed. Rudolf Carnap (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956); Simon Blackburn, “The Steps from Doing To Saying,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 110, no. 1 (2010): 1–2, 5–6, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9264.2010.00276.x.

45. Blackburn, “The Steps from Doing To Saying,” 1.

genealogical description of the origins and function of their particular form as manifested within the linguistic domain in question.

In the light of the preceding considerations, Berkeleian non-cognitivism seems best characterized in terms of such an understanding of expressivism. Moreover, the Berkeleian strategy for explicating moral language seems to exhibit all of the aforementioned elements of the contemporary non-cognitivist approach: it is expressivist, pragmatist and minimalist (i.e. anti-representationalist). Berkeley emphasizes that when it comes to religious and moral language, what we are primarily engaged in doing is detecting an attitude exhibited through linguistic practice (this being the expressivist element), while in that same context he focuses both on the linguistic practice itself (hence the pragmatist aspect) and on the non-referential (non-representational) character of such language (making the approach minimalist).

The combination of these three elements is paradigmatic for contemporary expressivism, inasmuch as that philosophical position seeks to combine a non-representationalist characterization of moral language with an affirmation of its ostensible truth-evaluability.⁴⁶ Emotivism, by contrast, did not concern itself with this question, simply asserting as it did that moral language was either a case of meaningless vocabulary deployed just to fulfil some utilitarian social role, or something exemplifying an error theory of moral discourse.⁴⁷ In both cases, emotivism seems to be tantamount to a kind of fictionalism. We speak about moral values knowing that they are false: i.e. that nothing corresponds to them and nothing makes them true. Expressivism, on the other hand, escapes the charge of fictionalism by showing that although there are no factual correspondence relations where moral language is concerned, there is a pragmatically established quasi-reference which suffices to make such language meaningful: we create the referential character of our moral language by following the rules of the linguistic community we happen to belong to, and we can explain genealogically how this community came to develop those particular categories into some form of life or other. The categories are therefore hardly subjective or false, as their objectivity is grounded in the normative dimension of the common linguistic practice of a given community, while everybody belonging to the latter is obligated to follow its rules.⁴⁸

46. See Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, 111–97; and Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, 153–88.

47. See Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 103–11; and Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, 21–8, and 115–8.

48. See Berkeley, “An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision,” 231; George Berkeley, “Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-water, and

This is, I believe, very much the spirit of Berkeley's own reflections on moral language, and the reason why contemporary expressivism looks promising as a way to make sense of his position. Berkeley himself stressed that where moral language is concerned we are not always dealing with a reference to a fact, or an idea standing for the latter, yet even so, such language remains meaningful, and is certainly not simply false or erroneous as emotivism would tend to imply. For him, as for expressivists, moral language attains a quasi-referential and truth-evaluable character through our participation in the linguistic practice of the community we belong to. In the Berkeleian context, of course, this will be a Christian community that contains both finite human beings and an infinite God. It is God who, through the Bible, has provided this community with religious and moral rules of conduct. The semantic dimension thus rests on a pragmatic level of determination: moral language expresses the moral attitudes of the community we belong to, and it is through this community that we are introduced to the Divine rules—rules that we would not otherwise be in a position to invoke at all.⁴⁹

On this view, in fact, we can bring together the full range of interpretations pertaining to the issue of moral language presented in scholarship relating to Berkeley. Berkeley can be seen as saying that language has both a cognitive and—sometimes—a non-cognitive character. In the case of the physical world, we may have available some kind of empirical verification of our language, as in the “solitary man” thought experiment. However, in the case of moral and religious language it sometimes happens that we do not meet with this ostensibly referential character by itself: we need to establish it through the practice of our moral or religious linguistic community. This point would seem to combine intuitions present both in the cognitive interpretation of Paul Olscamp (that aims to preserve the objectivity of morality),⁵⁰ the “operative language” interpretation of Kenneth Williford and Roomet Jakapi (that stresses Berkeley's instrumentalism),⁵¹ the “use theories” of John Russell Roberts and Kenneth L. Pearce (that draw attention to his pragmatism),⁵² and the non-cognitive interpretations of Bertil

divers other Subjects connected together and arising One from Another,” in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 5 (London: Nelson, 1953), 160, 254; and Pearce, *Language*, 157–71.

49. See Berkeley, “Alciphron,” 7.10.

50. See Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy*, 130–53.

51. See Williford, “Berkeley's Theory,” 271–301; Jakapi, “Berkeley's Defence,” 353–6; Jakapi, “Christian Mysteries,” 188–98; Jakapi, “Entry 720,” 86–90; Jakapi, “Emotive Meaning,” 401–11.

52. See Pearce, *Language*, 54–85, 139–72; Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob*, 40–72; Roberts, “Berkeley,” 421–34.

Belfrage and David Berman (that emphasize the non-referential character of some of the moral and religious utterances found in Berkeley's texts).⁵³ It seems that all of these interpretations possess some degree of validity, in that they manage to capture certain dimensions of Berkeley's reflections regarding moral language (and language in general). Interestingly, as we have seen, all of these aspects also seem to be covered by contemporary expressivism—a more general meta-philosophical position than the original emotivist stance that has typically been adopted as the main point of comparison for Berkeley's proposal. In short, we can say that while emotivism amounted to a metaethical position, both expressivism and Berkeley's considerations are closer to some sort of general meta-ontological stance relying heavily on commitments to both non-representationalism and pragmatism.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, the Berkeleian approach to moral (and religious) language can be encapsulated by the motto "From doing to saying" (to paraphrase the title of the famous book by Brandom⁵⁴), or statements to the effect that "place the discourse in amongst life's activities and you will gain a perspicuous representation of what is said when you use it."⁵⁵ The above motto is explicable in terms of the so-called "pragmatically mediated" character of semantic relations, where the latter, in turn, implies that language is a condition of our thinking about the world. In other words, we can only express our thoughts about the world and ourselves through language. What this assumption reveals is that only language can afford us a referential (semantic) relationship to the world. At the same time, this referential (semantic) relation can only be arrived at from a pragmatic perspective—that is, from the perspective of the language user—as we do not have any other mode of access to language itself, or through language to the world. Moreover, this pragmatic perspective is characterized by Berkeley in terms of the linguistic community and its rules governing assertion. Of course, this is only an interpretative hypothesis, but it may well help us to understand the direction of development of Berkeley's thinking about morality, inasmuch as he wanted to combine moral non-cognitivism and moral objectivity

53. See Belfrage, "The Clash on Semantics"; "Berkeley's theory"; "Development"; "The Theological Positivism"; "The Mystery of Goodness"; "Editor's Commentary."; Berman, "Cognitive Theology"; and "Berkeley's Semantic Revolution."

54. Robert Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob*, 65.

55. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing*, 2.

through an appeal to the idea of our following Divine rules. On such a view, concepts such as goodness and truth could be regarded as pragmatically mediated in terms reflecting the rules of a given linguistic community, but the rules themselves would still ultimately be constituted by Divine laws.⁵⁶

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