

Review

John R. Roberts. *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. xx + 172 pp.

John Roberts argues that the key for understanding how Berkeley's metaphysical idealism is consistent with common sense lies in his account of spirits. According to that account, commonsense objects are considered significant or meaningful as objects of experience. Since nothing is meaningful apart from its place in a discursive context, all objects must be understood ultimately as expressions within a divine communication. Because communication is the proper domain only of minds, all intelligible objects of experience must be understood as intentional expressions of mind. Spirits, accordingly, are the active causes by which things in nature (i.e., ideas) are organized in terms of an interpretable language (84-85). It is this recognition of the essentially linguistic character of experience that allows spirits to know of the world and one another (xx).

To most readers, this way of summing up Berkeley's philosophy should not be too surprising. But Roberts uses it to turn Berkeley's celebrated pronouncement "*esse is percipi*" on its head, claiming instead that true *esse is not percipi* (5), because only spirits (i.e., persons) truly exist. He points out that if existence consists in something's being perceived and spirits are not perceived, then spirits cannot be said to exist. So to avoid thinking of the *esse* of spirits like that of ideas, Roberts proposes that, for Berkeley, only persons exist and ideas merely "subsist" (3).

Unfortunately, this way of speaking ignores how thinkers who thematize the distinction between "subsist" and "exist" (e.g., the Stoics) mean just the opposite. Roberts does not cite Berkeley's NB 429 remark that "*existere is percipi or percipere*," so he does not recognize how, drawing on Suarez's distinction between *esse* and *existere*, *existere* includes the being of both minds and objects in the world. No doubt, for Berkeley, the ontological status of spirits is not identical to that of ideas; but this does not mean (as Roberts suggests) that ideas have only a "secondary" status (126). Even though their being ideas depends on being perceived by some mind, their characterization as determinate ideas does not. That is why (as Roberts suggests) the appeal to the divine language argument is crucial. But instead of using the turn to the divine language to provide a semblance of autonomy to things in the world, Roberts describes Berkeley's use of the divine language as an indication of how objects exist only as functions of persons (83, 128).

Part of what drives Roberts's attempt to subordinate the ontological status of ideas to that of spirits is his concern with the Lockean "ideational" theory of language. According to that theory, a word (e.g., "spirit") is significant only if it refers to an idea (40-43). Roberts proposes that Berkeley early on seems to have adopted this position only to have quickly rejected it when he considered abstract ideas (52). In a similar way, Roberts imagines that Berkeley at one point flirted with the view that spirits might be understood as bundles of

ideas (xxi, 6-8). But here again, Roberts concludes that it is only Berkeley's endorsement of Locke's semantic theory that creates problems and makes his appeal to the concept of "notions" appear *ad hoc* (39).

But the problem here, of course, is not with Berkeley's struggle to accommodate Locke; it is with thinking that our understanding of Berkeley is enhanced by appealing to Locke's theory. Roberts concedes that Berkeley does not embrace Locke's semantics, but he then muddles his point by concluding that Berkeley nonetheless accepts some of the presuppositions of Locke's semantics (49-50). In terms of those presuppositions, spirits could be misunderstood as bundles of ideas. But once we wean ourselves away from using Locke as the filter through which to read the *Notebooks*, we can begin thinking of spirit as the activity of *identifying* ideas in relation to one another (i.e., "bundling" them). Readers of Berkeley do not therefore have to think that he ever maintained the so-called Humean bundle theory (7, 99, 103-4). Roberts does not consider this possibility because he reads Berkeley through Locke's eyes. That would explain why he reverts to the now discredited "standard reading" of the "+" sign, by which Berkeley supposedly expresses dissatisfaction with some of his *Notebook* entries on spirits (7, 112).

Of course, Roberts's strategy here is a common one—namely, claiming that we can get a "good, clean start" in describing Berkeley's basic views on existence "by locating them with respect to two traditions of the early modern period that inform and compete with his, those of Descartes and Locke" (8; also 9, 23). But once he imports Cartesian or Lockean treatments of abstraction, unity, substance, and existence into the discussion (13-37), he stirs up a dust in which Berkeley's distinctive views are quickly obscured.

Despite these methodological hindrances, Roberts comes up with several provocative insights about how Berkeley brings together his theories of spirits and the divine language of nature. For example, Roberts points out that, for Berkeley, we experience things as unities simply as a result of God's will (31-33). Contrary to what Locke says, we do not "selectively attend" to certain features of our experience to abstract the objects we perceive (57, 70), nor do we assume that the unity or existence of those objects is anything other than what we perceive. This commonsense apprehension of things forestalls efforts to discover supposedly more fundamental principles beneath what we experience. In this sense Berkeley proposes what Roberts calls a "Protestant semantics" in which the mob does not have to rely on the interpretations of scientific or philosophic priestcraft to know things in the world (52-53). Rather, common sense depends on understanding nature as a language of engagement and action (64-65).

This last point is central to Roberts's project, in that it highlights how the linguisticity of nature is also its mentality. To say, as Berkeley does, that ideas are signs of other ideas always already invokes the notion of mind because the activity of signifying is an act of mind (75-76). An idea can be *understood* only within a language, and a language indicates the presence of mind (77). From this Roberts concludes that thinking of an idea as an object means understanding it in the context of a mind using a language: "Treating the collection of ideas that constitutes a discourse as a suitable object of interpretation means we have to consider those ideas, those sensible things, *as being used by a spirit* for

the purposes of communication” (78). Nothing is intelligible, then, apart from its use in the divine discourse.

Here Roberts is close to an insight that would help him overcome the burden of the Cartesian notion of mind, but he never quite shakes off the view that spirits somehow must be things that are at least accessible reflectively (37). The final step would be to link mind and language *essentially*, making signification not only an indication of a mind’s activity but also the defining character of mind. That kind of move would fit nicely into Roberts’s scheme of portraying all objects ultimately in terms of what he calls “the personal stance,” in which objects of knowledge are linked intentionally and morally through spirit to reality as a whole (83). In such a view all things would be “appropriate targets of what are irreducibly evaluative activities” and could thus justifiably be called persons (128). In such a view, however, ideas are eclipsed by spirits. To maintain the ontological legitimacy of ideas would require abandoning the attempt to frame Berkeley’s account on a Cartesian or Lockean model. This, though, is something that Roberts is unwilling to do, because he thinks that immaterial simple substances have identities apart from the intelligibility of the objects they identify and associate (88-91).

Roberts thus argues that when we say of something that it is a spirit or mind, we do not “represent” or signify it; rather, we express a non-cognitive attitude toward it (80-82). That is, in thinking of a thing as an object of mind, we choose to think of it as an object of will, an object that is intended to be communicated. This apprehension of things as inherently intentional and necessarily related as signifiers and signifieds requires that we adopt what Roberts calls “the religious stance” (86-87), a stance in which we see all things as objects that are not only willed but also things for which the persons who perceive them are morally responsible (118-22). In this sense, the “religious stance” is the “personal stance.”

This way of speaking about the relation between minds and their ideas puts a strain on attempts to explain Berkeleian minds as either Cartesian substances or Lockean substrata. Nonetheless, Roberts tries to hang on to the Cartesian and Lockean accounts of mind, concluding that Berkeleian spirits are both Cartesian substances (though not Cartesian minds) and Lockean persons (though not Lockean substances) (88-90). The upshot of all of this is to make the Berkeleian notion of spirit a mishmash of views of his predecessors.

Thankfully, Roberts turns away from the “good, clean” dust-up provided by the filters of Descartes and Locke when he begins to describe Berkeleian spirits as the will that there be certain identifications and unities in our ideas (102). This shift away from thinking of will as something that someone *has* to what someone *is* indicates just how radically different Berkeley’s account is from Descartes’ or Locke’s (93-96). For Berkeley the essence or “very being” of a spirit is not to be a substratum in which experiences inhere, but rather it is to be the activity of assuming responsibility for those experiences (96, 100-4). Even in passive perception, this assumption of responsibility is an act of will, because it is a choice to interpret things in sign-signified relations (107-9, 118).

Here, of course, the question of occasionalism arises, in that it invites us to ask why we would intentionally will to interpret things in certain significant relations and not in others. That is, why would we adopt a certain perspective? Or why would we not adopt the religious stance? Those are the questions that one would have expected Roberts to have addressed in his penultimate chapter on occasionalism. Alas, that chapter shows only that if acts of will are understood as abstract occasions, then Berkeley is no occasionalist (122). Suppose, however, that occasionalism is not understood that way; then the question of how the possibility of freedom in human experience is compatible with divine sovereignty becomes really interesting. No doubt, Roberts's suggestion that Berkeley considers objects as images that (to use Wilfrid Sellars's term) "manifest" themselves *to us* as objects in *our* world brings Berkeley's immaterialism closer to common sense (129, 163). But in the end, what we want is an explanation of how it is possible to adopt a stance of faith in which we sense the communal character of a multiplicity of objects of experience. That would require a description of how the divine language of nature and the nature of mind are essentially linked. However, as long as the ghosts of Descartes and Locke are allowed to dictate strategies for interpreting Berkeley, that will not happen.

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