

Berkeley: Philosophy of Language
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Abstract:

This essay is designed to provide an introduction to Berkeley's views regarding the philosophy of language and the principle interpretive options scholars have pursued. The discussion is organized around two *prima facie* puzzling facts: (a) Berkeley gave the philosophy of language a privileged position in his philosophy. (b) Berkeley does relatively little to provide a positive philosophy of language. The essay is broken into two parts. Part 1 focuses on (a), identifying the privileged position Berkeley gives the philosophy of language by explaining the relationship between Berkeley's views regarding the philosophy of philosophy, "abstract Ideas," and the philosophy of language. Part 1.1. "The Dust Metaphor," reviews the opening paragraphs of Berkeley's "Introduction" to *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, so as to make Berkeley's intention to pursue a deflationary strategy toward philosophical problems explicit—i.e., that most philosophical perplexity is a result of the fact that "at first we raise a dust and then complain we cannot see." Part 1.2. then takes up what Berkeley regards as the most pernicious bit of dust we have kicked up, a belief in "abstract ideas." Part 1.3. then identifies the mistake Berkeley claims led us to kick up this bit of dust: a view about the nature of language. Since, Berkeley approaches the philosophy of language from within a deflationary strategy, the apparent tension between (a) and (b) is relieved. Berkeley's primary concern in the "Introduction" is not the development of a positive philosophy of language, but rather to undercut a false view about how language works. Naturally, in the course of trying to undercut the mistaken philosophy of language that produced the belief in abstract ideas, Berkeley does make some positive claims about the matter. Part 2 of the essay turns to (b) and reviews the three main interpretive options that Berkeley's positive claims, considered against the background of his negative claims, appear to leave open. Part 2.1 reviews the principles advantages and disadvantages of attributing an Ideational Theory to Berkeley. Part 2.2. reviews the main advantages and disadvantages of attributing a Use Theory to Berkeley. Part 2.3. then takes up the advantages and disadvantages of attributing a Mixed Theory according to which Berkeley embraced an Ideational Theory for some realms of discourse and a Use Theory for others. Throughout the essay will primarily focus on Berkeley's two principle works touching on the philosophy of language, the "Introduction" to *The Principles of Human Knowledge* and the "Seventh Dialogue" of *Alciphron*.

Outline

Introduction

1. Philosophy of Philosophy and Philosophy of Language
 - 1.1. The Dust Metaphor
 - 1.2. Abstract Ideas
 - 1.3. The Source of Abstract Ideas

2. Three Interpretive Options
 - 2.1. The Ideational Theory Interpretation
 - 2.1.1. Synopsis
 - 2.1.2. Advantages
 - 2.1.3. Disadvantages
 - 2.2. The Use Theory Interpretation
 - 2.2.1. Synopsis
 - 2.2.2. Advantages
 - 2.2.3. Disadvantages
 - 2.3. The Mixed Theory Interpretation
 - 2.3.1. Synopsis
 - 2.3.1. Advantages
 - 2.3.2. Disadvantages