

Reply to Seth Bordner's "Berkeley's Defense of Common Sense"

Seth contrasts his own view of the relationship between Bishop Berkeley's work and common sense with both my view and George Pappas' view. I, of course, speak won't for Pappas, but as far as my view is concerned, I hope to convince Seth that he has mistaken the contrast between his view and my own.

Seth holds that, what he calls, the standard view, misunderstand both:

A) *How* Berkeley defends the common sense of the vulgar. (p. 11-12)

B) *Why* Berkeley thinks the common sense of the vulgar is in need of defending.  
(p. 12)

As Seth sees it,

Standard interpretations take Berkeley to be defending commonsense by building a metaphysical system that somehow shows how commonly held beliefs are either true or at least justifiable. (We will see this more clearly below.) Berkeley's project is alleged to be constructive—to build a better metaphysics and epistemology, one that, as Bennett says, "assures plain folk of the existence of the things that they believe in." As we have seen, however, the plain folk need no assurances—they're just fine on their own, or at least they would be were it not for the infectious skepticism of materialist philosophers. Berkeley's defense of commonsense is instead destructive—his aim is to prevent the corruption of the vulgar by attacking and destroying that which threatens them. (p. 14)

Seth's approach to (A): [*How* Berkeley is defending the common sense of the vulgar.]

- A. Berkeley's aim is *not* building a metaphysics that will justify their beliefs, but rather *destroying* the infection that threatens their unreflective common sense.

Seth's approach to (B): [*Why* Berkeley is defending the common sense of the vulgar.]

- B. The unreflective common sense of the vulgar is threatened by the skepticism of materialist philosophy.

There are two issues I'll address: Seth's interpretation of my view and his interpretation of Berkeley. These more or less can be broken down along the lines of (A) and (B).

(A) *How* Berkeley defends the common sense of the vulgar.

While I was reading Seth's take on (A) *How* Berkeley defends the common sense of the vulgar, my thought was, as Euphranor might put it,

O [Seth]! while you talk, I feel an affection in my soul like the trembling of one lute upon striking the unison strings of another.

Something along those lines, anyway. In fact, if I'm being completely honest, I heard the harmony so clearly that my vanity was whining that I hadn't been cited yet. By the time I was finishing up section 1.2. "How is Berkeley Defending Common Sense?," Vanity was hoping that Seth was about to say that he was pursuing a harmonic variation on the approach I pursued in my work.

Vanity met with its usual end because, at the end of the section, Seth tries to smash my lute! Or at least, that's how it seemed to me when I ran smack into this:

[Berkeley's] is not the project of divining the mind of the common person so that he can build up a metaphysics for the mob." (p. 16)

Since I'm cited here, along with the pointed mention of the title of my book, one is to take it that here we have a key point of disagreement between Seth and I. My view is presented as an exemplar of the offending Standard View that gets both (A) and (B) wrong.

So, is that true? Again, we'll start with focus (A). Do I present Berkeley as defending common sense by building a metaphysics to justify it? No. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, this is explicitly contrary to my approach. Seth and I are on the same side here.

**Harmony:** "Berkeley's Deflationary Strategy" [Ch. II.3]

A pivotal element of my approach to Berkeley's metaphysics is my claim that it is essential that we see Berkeley as pursuing what (for better or worse) I dub a "deflationary strategy." (See especially II.3-6, pp. 44-58.) So just to give you an idea, in Chapter II, in the section titled "Berkeley's Deflationary Strategy" (II.3), I begin by quoting a line from his notebooks,

[Remember]: To be eternally banishing Metaphysics & recalling Men to Common Sense.

Among other things, I quote Anne Berkeley, the Bishop's learned wife. I think she had it exactly right when in a letter to their son after the Bishop's death she wrote,

[H]ad he *built* as he has pulled down he had been then a Master Builder indeed, but unto every man his work. Some must remove rubbish... (Emphasis in original.)

It's in the approving context of such quotations that I say we should recall the title of the Bishop's principle work *A Treatise Concerning the **Principles** of Human Knowledge*. What I was very keen to draw attention to here is the fact that the "principles" Bishop

Berkeley is immediately interested in are not principles which will provide us with a foundation upon which to build a metaphysics. Rather, what Berkeley tells us is,

My purpose... is, to try if I can discover what those principles are, which have introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions into the several sects of philosophy...(Intro. 4)

As I put it,

[Berkeley's] is no Cartesian project. The principles he is most interested in laying bare are the principles—i.e. the origins, the sources—of *error* in our philosophical thinking.” (p. 45)

I insist upon the importance of taking the good Bishop seriously, when in the *Introduction* to the *Principles* he tells us that,

Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not the whole, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves. That we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see. (Intro. 3)

This, I say, is Bishop Berkeley's philosophy of philosophy, and “we should let it guide our understanding of his argumentative strategy.” (p. 45)

- The Deflationary Strategy applied to Abstract Ideas

I then set out to show how he worked this strategy against the biggest bits of dust that we've kicked up, *abstract ideas*. (Furthermore, I argue that belief in the various abstract ideas have an even deeper common source: a particular perniciously erroneous view about how language works. But at present, that's neither here nor there.)

This deflationary reading of Berkeley occupies a rather prominent and pivotal place in my book, for as I'm fond of reiterating, Berkeley's *Introduction*, with its—according

to me—deflationary attack on abstract ideas was to be the introduction to all the originally planned parts of the *Principles*. So, in other words, I present Berkeley's deflationary approach as his philosophy of philosophy, etc.

In short, I do not present Berkeley as pursuing "the project of divining the mind of the common person so that he can build up a metaphysics for the mob." So, as I see it, Seth has introduced discord, where there is quite only a very tight harmony.

### **Discord**

We will have to look elsewhere for disagreement. And that brings us to (B), *Why Berkeley defends the common sense of the vulgar*. Here I would argue that Seth has misinterpreted both my view and Berkeley's.

Seth tells us that,

- (i) It is the vulgar's natural realistic disposition to take the perceived world as being the entirety of the real world, combined with their ignorance and lack of interest for speculation, that makes them so resistant to skepticism and therefore esteemed in Berkeley's eyes. (p. 11)

And that, Berkeley's aim is,

- (ii) to prevent the corruption of the vulgar by attacking and destroying that which threatens them." (p. 14).

And that what threatens them is,

- (iii) The "infectious skepticism of materialist philosophers."

So in short, Seth's view is that,

- (iv) Berkeley's aim is to prevent the corruption of the vulgar's disposition to take the perceived world as being the entirety of the real world by destroying that which threatens this disposition, the skepticism of the materialist philosophers.

There are a number of things here I can't go along with. First, with regard to one aspect of (i), it should be said that Berkeley hasn't any kind of special respect for unreflectively held beliefs held in ignorance *because* they are held unreflectively/in ignorance.

One need not read (i) this way. So, it might well be unfair to attribute to Seth the position that Berkeley, even in part, esteems the vulgar's resistance to skepticism *because* it flows from their ignorance. I raise it, because there were enough lines like (i) that I kept worrying that it might be part of his view.

So with that important caveat in place, I would insist that Berkeley's beef isn't with learned, i.e., philosophical, reflection. It's with...well...*bad* philosophical reflection.

It hardly needs saying that Berkeley was a great champion of learning and philosophical reflection. He devoted the prime of his life to bringing education to America—land of the free and home of the vulgar. Moreover, his ideal for this largely unformed, fledgling society prominently includes the *educated commoner*. The Bishop conspicuously depicted his model in the *Alciphron* dialogue in the form of the *educated yeoman farmer*, Euphranor. Euphranor is a devout Christian, who...

...from the time he left the university, hath lived in this small town, where he is possessed of a convenient house with a hundred acres of land adjoining to it; which, being improved by his own labour, yield him a plentiful subsistence. He hath a good collection, chiefly of old books, left him by a clergyman his uncle, under whose care he was brought up. And the business of his farm doth not hinder him from making good use of it. He hath read much, and thought more; his health and strength of body enabling him the better to bear fatigue of mind. He is of opinion that he could not carry on his studies with more advantage in the closet than the field, where his mind is seldom idle while he prunes the trees, follows the plough, or looks after his flocks.

Euphranor is Berkeley ideal citizen for this new society. His is an educated common man who, we quickly learn, is fit to reflect on even the *deepest* and most *sacred* of questions. The likes of Euphranor finds little to unsettle his Christian faith when he comes into prolonged contact with the skeptical and atheistic philosophies of a pair of upper-class, educated “free thinkers,” i.e. Alciphron and Lysicles. The hope of the “Burmuda Project” was that it would help produce more citizens like Euphranor. This is not a man with any esteem for ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

A final note on this Berkeley, so far as I can see, doesn’t have any particular esteem for the vulgar. But (i) seems to imply that he does. But why think that?

OK. Moving on now to things I’m sure that Seth is asserting. It seems that Seth and I disagree about the fundamental aim of Bishop Berkeley’s deflationary defense of common sense. Seth sees it as primarily directed against “skepticism,” but what he means by ‘skepticism’ is *skepticism about the natural world*. What Berkeley is seeking to protect is the vulgar’s “disposition to take the perceived world as being the entirety of the real world” and that that disposition is threatened by the “skepticism of the materialist philosophers.”

I disagree with several things here. First, the common person (vulgar) of Berkeley’s day certainly *did not* take the perceived world to be the entirety of the real world. Even the common person of today, does not hold that. Most notably, the vulgar believe in things that they regard as being far more important, and lasting, than the perceived world; they believe in God and their immortal souls. The ‘vulgar’ does not refer to modern day physicalists. It doesn’t even refer to early modern physicalists. If such a disposition exists, then Berkeley is historically one of its greatest antagonists.

Suppose that we remove the assumption that the vulgar are naturalists. Still it’s hard to see why Berkeley would be worry about the common person’s natural disposition, if you will, toward *naïve realism about the perceived world*.

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<sup>1</sup> And lest we forget, Berkeley also promoted the education of women. His wife, being another ideal. This, of course, was not a popular idea at the time. Moreover, while I make no apologies for his confusing and despicable act of purchasing two slaves while in America, it is relevant to our point that he saw fit to educate them.

My primary objection to (B) is that Seth appears to be taking the skepticism about the perceived world as the good Bishop's principle target. It, however, is merely a subordinate target—for want a greater imagination and, thus, ability to come up with a better name. The good Bishop's philosophical works are ultimately aimed at skepticism (and atheism!) regarding *spiritual matters*. Or so says, I. But I only say so because Berkeley says so...so clearly and so very often. In my "Introduction" I quote the following from the *Three Dialogues* (p. xvi) because it's from this that I take my lead:

Hylas: I was considering the odd fate of those men who have in all ages, through an affectation of being distinguished from the vulgar, or some unaccountable turn of thought, pretended either to believe nothing at all, or to believe the most extravagant things in the world. This however might be borne, if their paradoxes and scepticism did not draw after them some consequences of general disadvantage to mankind. But the mischief lieth here; that when men of less leisure see them who are supposed to have spent their whole time in the pursuits of knowledge, professing an entire ignorance of all things, or advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and commonly received principles, *they will be tempted to entertain suspicions concerning the **most important truths**, which they had hitherto held **sacred and unquestionable***. (Emphasis mine).

As the Bishop repeatedly advertises in his title pages, his works are written in defense of "the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a deity." This is done, he tells us, *in opposition to "Sceptics and Atheists."* The skepticism he's fundamentally concerned with is not idle philosophical skepticism about spiritual matters. These are the "most important truths;" the ones the vulgar, the common lot of men, hold "sacred and unquestionable." The common sort of men do not hold realism about the natural world *sacred*.

So as I see it, Seth, has misidentified the nature of the danger that materialist philosophers' skepticism presents. The worry, as the *theist* Hylas says, is the trickle-down effect of such sorts claiming to believe such bizarre, paradoxical things. The effect of hearing their "betters," the educated elite, claiming to believe such things has a



potentially destructive trickle-down effect on their *sacred* beliefs. That's what Bishop Berkeley is ultimately concerned about.

So, as opposed to (A), here Seth and I do seem to disagree about something here. I see Bishop Berkeley's deflationary strategy as pursued in defense of sacred common beliefs of fundamental *practical* importance—the *immortality of the soul* and the *existence of God*. (Together, these two beliefs, the Bishop holds, form the foundation of morality and thus the foundation of good order among us.) So, given this, my answer to Seth's objection that *I can't explain why the Bishop cares to defend these particular commonly held beliefs* will be obvious. (pp 22-3) The Bishop cares to defend them because these are the most important beliefs, the sacred ones.<sup>2</sup> As for Seth's other objection, i.e., that my "view does not explain why the belief in God is worth defending *qua commonsense*," this is not something I think I *should* explain. I simply don't see Berkeley as interested in defending a belief *because* it's commonly held. He's interested in defending a commonly held belief, e.g. that God exists, because it is true and very important that people continue to believe it.

Finally, since the topics of God and our immortal souls concern the *esse* of spirits and since Berkeley's ontology consists (or so I argue), at its most basic level simply of immaterial spirits standing in normative relations to one another, I do see "the fundamental link between Berkeley's philosophy and common sense as ultimately running through his account of spirits. I claim that there is deep link between the sacred beliefs of the common man and Berkeley's metaphysics and that that link is Berkeley's spiritual realism. ." In short, the common man is a spiritual realist, and Berkeley's metaphysics is that of spiritual realism. Thus, the bulk of my book is directed toward providing an interpretation of Berkeley's positive metaphysics of spirit and to showing that, contrary to popular *philosophical* belief, it is a coherent and compelling metaphysics. This, if true, certainly buttresses Berkeley's ultimate philosophical aims in so far as it helps defend his philosophy from its most notorious line of attack. But I certainly do not present Berkeley attempting to divine the mind of the common person so that he can build up a metaphysics for the mob.

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it's no part of my view that he is interested in defending the vulgar's beliefs *per se*, i.e. just because some belief is one the vulgar happen to commonly hold.