

John Russell Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 172.

A reader of the title of this well-written and engaging book might be forgiven for thinking that the author's design is to provide us with a complete conspectus of Berkeley's views on the nature of reality. But in fact it is only in passing that Roberts touches on the metaphysical question that has most exercised Berkeley scholars, namely the nature of sensible objects and their qualities. Rather, Roberts focuses on the nature of Berkeleian spirits, those active, indivisible, imperceptible substances in which sensible objects and qualities are supposed to exist.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first chapter, Roberts argues that Berkeley identifies being and oneness, that spirits are the only true unities, and hence that spirits are the only true beings. Sensible objects, being dependent on spirits, exist only in a secondary sense. Given that Berkeley's spirits are unities, it follows directly, contrary to the views of some scholars (including Muehlmann and Tipton), that they are not bundles of sensations or volitions. As Roberts reads Berkeley, we acquire the concept of unity by reflection on our own (unitary) minds. But reflection is not a kind of Lockean inner sense or Cartesian pure intellect, for these latter faculties are, while Berkeleian reflection is not, representational. In the second chapter, Roberts defends the latter claim, arguing that Berkeley's famous hostility to abstract ideas is founded in his rejection of a representational theory of meaning and understanding. As Roberts reads him, Berkeley instead embraces the Wittgensteinian dictum that meaning is use, and concludes that understanding consists, not in the grasp of ideas, but rather in the mastery of sign use. In the third chapter, Roberts considers the problem of other minds and argues that

Berkeley's rejection of the representational theory leads him to deny that our relation to the existence of other minds consists in belief. Roberts' Berkeley adopts a form of non-cognitivism instead, holding that our commitment to other minds is the product of a pragmatically justified religious stance (a non-naturalistic version of Dennett's intentional stance) that is at bottom a kind of faith. In the fourth chapter, which is the heart of the book, Roberts weaves Berkeley's few scattered remarks about spirits into a provocative picture according to which spirits are essentially active wills, similar to Cartesian minds in that their being and essence coincide, but also similar to Lockean persons in having an essentially forensic unity as subjects of responsibility ascriptions. In the last two chapters, Roberts explains how, despite appearances, this picture of spirit is both inconsistent with Malebranchian occasionalism and in line with common sense, properly understood.

In the context of a brief review, it is not possible for me to do justice to the many thought-provoking strands of textual interpretation and argument to be found in this book. Roberts does a very good job of situating Berkeley in historical context (particularly through comparison and contrast with Descartes, Locke, and Malebranche), and ably marshals textual evidence from less well known primary sources (particularly Berkeley's early unpublished notebooks, and the late works, *Alciphron* and *Siris*). I also think that Roberts provides an illuminating explanation for why Berkeleian spirits cannot be "congeries of Perceptions" (NB 580). In the end, however, I do not think that Roberts' interpretation adequately captures Berkeley's metaphysics of spirit.

The main difficulties with which Roberts must contend are these. First, it is difficult to accept that Berkeley completely rejects the representational theory of meaning

and understanding. It is true, as Roberts emphasizes, that Berkeley denies that we can have any idea of spirit, on the grounds that (i) ideas are passive, (ii) spirits are active, (iii) representation is a matter of resemblance, and (iv) nothing passive resembles anything active. However, Roberts does not pay close enough attention to Berkeley's theory of notions as mental intermediaries capable of representing active things. It is true, as Roberts notes, that Berkeley thinks of notions as the meanings of words denoting active things, including God, whom Berkeley treats as a perfect spirit. But Roberts' Wittgensteinian interpretation of Berkeley's conception of meaning does not fit well with Berkeley's description of his own notion of God as an "active thinking image of the Deity" (*Three Dialogues*, 232). Berkeley's notion of God is an *image* inasmuch as it represents (that is, images, and hence resembles) its object, and it is *active* inasmuch as only something active can represent something active. Indeed, it is because notions are representational that Berkeley sometimes describes them as ideas "in a large sense" (*Principles* 140; *Three Dialogues*, 231). Moreover, it seems wrong to think of Berkeley as *wholly* hostile to mental intermediaries. Roberts is surely right that Berkeley rejects the Lockean claim that all non-syncategorematic terms signify ideas, for Berkeley thinks of religious and mathematical terms as meaningful even though they do not stand for ideas. But it does not follow that Berkeley adopts the directly contrary view that *no* word signifies *any* mental intermediary: surely the most plausible interpretation is that Berkeley takes 'forest green' to signify the idea of forest green and 'God' to signify the notion of God.

Berkeley's doctrine of notions undermines Roberts' claim that Berkeley denies that we *believe* in the existence of other minds. For, as Berkeley sees it, although we do

not have *ideas* that represent other minds, we do have *notions* of other minds. So there is little reason to think that Berkeley offers a quasi-Dennettian, non-cognitivist solution to the problem of other minds.

Second, there is ample textual evidence that Berkeley does not think of spirits as pure wills, for which thought ends up as nothing more than a mode of volition. In the *Third Dialogue*, Berkeley infers that the cause of his sensory ideas must be both a will *and* an understanding, and hence must be a spirit because “will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit” (*Three Dialogues*, 240). Indeed, at times Berkeley identifies spirit, not with the will, but with the understanding. Thus, he writes that the existence of a spirit “consists...in perceiving ideas and thinking” (*Principles* 139), and identifies spirit as “that which perceives” (*Principles* 7). Given that the strongest textual evidence for Berkeley’s identification of spirits as wills derives from the early unpublished notebooks, it is reasonable to suppose that the purely volitional theory of spirit (like the bundle theory of spirit and Malebranchian occasionalism) is the product of early flirtation with a doctrine that he later came to disavow.

Finally, there is a problem with Roberts’ account of why Berkeley’s theory of spirit is in keeping with the metaphysics of the mob. As Roberts sees it, mob metaphysics, like Berkeley’s own metaphysics, is founded on the Judeo-Christian doctrine that spirit is the fundamental category of being, and hence constitutes an essentially religious conception of reality. But this account of Berkeley’s understanding of common sense does not fit well with his published views. In the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley repeatedly opposes common sense to skepticism, not to atheism. For example, Berkeley writes that common sense comprises the following tenets: (i) that

the qualities we perceive are on the objects, (ii) that we must believe our senses, (iii) that we know the real nature of things and can be assured of their existence, (iv) that real colors and sounds are not unknown shapes or motions, (v) that motions are themselves either swift or slow, (vi) that a thoughtless, inactive substance cannot operate on spirit, and (vii) that the least particle of a body does not contain innumerable extended parts (*Three Dialogues*, 244). There is nothing in this or in any other of his published descriptions of common sense to suggest that Berkeley thinks of mob metaphysics as incorporating any specifically religious doctrine.

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