

BERKELEY: A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED

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CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

In the first part of this introductory chapter, I sketch out a biographical account of Berkeley's life. In the second part I provide a brief overview of Berkeley's philosophical account of the world and its relation to philosophical perplexity and common sense.

SECTION ONE: BERKELEY'S LIFE¹

The Early Period: Young Berkeley

George Berkeley was born to the fairly well-to-do William and Eliza Berkeley in the county of Kilkenny, Ireland on March 12, 1685. His grandfather had come to Ireland from England after the Restoration, having received the collectorship of Belfast and his father also held a collectorship. Berkeley was the eldest of six sons—Rowland, Ralph, William, Robert, and Thomas. While we know little of the first two, we know William was a soldier and Robert was a churchman and a chief support of Berkeley during his declining years. We also know that Thomas, the youngest, had been condemned to death for bigamy in 1726.

Berkeley lived at Dysart Castle, near Thomastown until he entered the boarding school, Kilkenny College in 1696 (at the age of 11). He entered Trinity College, Dublin in 1700 (at the age of 16). Locke's *Essay* was already part of the course, thanks to the influence of Irish philosopher, William Molyneux (1656–98). Berkeley was elected Scholar of the House in 1702 and received his BA degree in 1704 (at the age of 20).

Early accounts of Berkeley's life circulated questionable details about his student days, helping to promote the negative image of

Berkeley. In particular, he was represented as a recluse and the butt of student jokes—“the greatest dunce in the whole university.”² In a famous joke, he is said to have walked into a post, whence someone responded, “Never mind, Doctor, there’s no matter in it.”³ Additionally, some alleged fondness for reading “airy romances” was considered as one peculiar source of his immaterialism. Generally such caricatures have been discredited. Certainly, it seems clear that Berkeley was hardly a recluse given his involvement in at least two student societies during these years.

After receiving his BA in 1704, Berkeley remained at Trinity College in order to wait for an opening so that he could become a University Fellow (this involved teaching and administration in the college). After a highly competitive examination, Berkeley was elected Junior Fellow in 1707 and received his MA a month later. That year he anonymously published his first work *Arithmetica and Miscellaneous Mathematica* (a minor contribution much of which Berkeley had written three years earlier).

Fellows were obligated to take Holy Orders; and in 1709 Berkeley was ordained a deacon and in 1710 ordained a priest. On both occasions he was ordained by Dr. Ashe, Bishop of Clogher and the former Provost of Trinity. Apparently there was some controversy concerning Berkeley’s 1710 ordination: William King, Archbishop of Dublin, was angered that Berkeley had been ordained without his permission, and Berkeley issued an official apology in 1710. There is other evidence that the relationship between Berkeley and King may have been far from agreeable.⁴

Between 1707 and 1710 there is tremendous work on Berkeley’s part, culminating in his 1710 masterpiece, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In 1871, A. C. Fraser first published Berkeley’s private notebooks. And while Berkeley’s notebooks have been the source of considerable scholarly dispute, this much seems relatively clear: the notebooks were written around 1707–08 and they reflect Berkeley’s developing philosophical views. Additionally, there exists an earlier version of Berkeley’s *Introduction to the Principles* (concerning his antiabstractionism) which was probably written in 1708. There are important discrepancies between this and the one which was published with the *Principles* in 1710, again indicating Berkeley’s philosophical development.⁵ In 1709, Berkeley’s revolutionary *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* was published. An important

contribution to the science of vision, the overall Berkeleian approach came to play a dominant role until the mid-1950s.⁶

In 1710, Berkeley published the *Principles*. While this philosophical work has ultimately secured an important place in the philosophical canon, it was hardly well received initially. Indeed, it seems to have been generally rejected and ridiculed without a fair reading (or any reading at all). Influential philosopher Samuel Clarke, placing him in the same camp as Malebranche, accused him of an abstruse metaphysics that was of no use to practical affairs. This was anathema to Berkeley, who commented to his friend Percival that, “Fine spun metaphysics are what I on all occasions declare against, and if anyone shall shew me anything of that sort in my ‘Treatise’ I will willingly correct it.”⁷ When further pressed by Percival to offer his objections to Berkeley’s position, Dr. Clarke refused to respond at all. Undaunted by this reception, however, Berkeley began working on *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in order to put his theory “in a different light.”

In 1712, Berkeley published three earlier sermons assembled together as *Passive Obedience*—his most detailed discussion of moral and political philosophy. His reasons for publishing involved his desire to respond to accusations that he was a Jacobite, which emerged as a consequence of his sermons.⁸ In this work, Berkeley argues, *pace* Locke, that it is always wrong for subjects to actively rebel against their sovereign. While subjects may be bound to refuse an immoral law requiring positive action (and so receive the punishments determined by the sovereign) in cases when the sovereign requires subjects to act contrary to morality, outright rebellion is never acceptable. Berkeley’s view that rebellion against the state is against moral law is easily applied to the Glorious Revolution itself by which William III and Mary II ascended to the throne—so it is easy to see why such accusations might have been made. Yet, it could also be taken as him urging restraint on the part of the Jacobites with respect to the current reign, and Berkeley explicitly endorses an anti-Jacobite position in *Advice to the Tories* (1715). So it is a matter of some ambiguity what Berkeley’s actual political position was and whether it was a position that changed over time. It is worth noting that in a letter to his friend, Percival, Berkeley denies there is any legitimate distinction to be drawn between a king *de jure* and a king *de facto*.⁹ If so, while the Glorious Revolution may have been against the moral law,

once established, submission to the sovereign would have still been required.¹⁰

Berkeley left Ireland in 1713 for London in part to publish his *Dialogues* there (which he did in May of that year), in part to meet “men of merit.” There, Berkeley quickly became friends with many of the leading London intellectuals of the day: Joseph Addison, John Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope, Richard Steele, and Jonathan Swift. In 1714, Berkeley contributed several essays to Steele’s new periodical *The Guardian*. Scholarly controversy still continues over authorship of at least some of these essays, all of which were published anonymously. Recent evidence also shows that Berkeley was the editor of Steele’s *Ladies Library* (1715), an educational book for women which was published anonymously “by a Lady.”¹¹

Around this time, Berkeley embarked on two Continental tours. During the first one which lasted ten months between 1713–14, Berkeley had the occasion to visit Paris, the Alps, Turin, Genoa, Sicily, Pisa, and Florence. While in Paris, Berkeley may have had the opportunity to meet Malebranche. Whether this is the case or not, a fanciful story emerged that they *did* in fact meet and that during heated dispute, Malebranche became so worked up that he died a few days later (Berkeley is cited as the *occasional* cause). The story can’t be true, however, since Malebranche died a few years later (rather than a few days later) in 1715.

Before Berkeley began his second tour, the issue of Jacobism returned to haunt him. In 1715 he published *Advice to the Tories Who Have Taken the Oaths* urging Tories to acquiesce to the ascension of George I (of the House of Hanover) after the death of Queen Anne. This has been taken as evidence that Berkeley was not—at least not at this time—a Jacobite, since many of the leaders of the Tories had Jacobite sensibilities. The pamphlet preceded the failed Jacobite Rebellion of 1715. But in 1716 Berkeley had sought the church preferment of St. Paul’s in Dublin. Initially confident of his chances, he was ultimately denied in favor of Duke Tyrrell who had written a letter denouncing Berkeley. In addition to criticizing Berkeley’s long absence from Trinity College, he cited *Passive Obedience* as evidence of Berkeley’s Jacobism.

Berkeley began his second Continental tour in 1716. Dr. Ashe, Bishop of Clogher granted Berkeley a tutorship to accompany his son George Ashe on his travels. The tour lasted considerably longer than the first one, ending in 1720. They traveled through France to

Turin, Rome, Naples, Florence, and Sicily. And Berkeley kept journals (some of which remain) of his travels in Italy. Of note, it is apparently sometime during his travels in Italy that Berkeley lost his draft of the second part of the *Principles* which was to concern his views about the mind. Upon returning to France in 1720, Berkeley submitted *De Motu* to the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris, which had offered a prize for essays on motion. In this contribution to natural science Berkeley argued against the real existence of dynamic forces (*pace* Leibniz). While Berkeley did not win the contest, he published *De Motu* in 1721.

The Middle Period: Dean Berkeley

Berkeley returned to Trinity College where he had already been appointed Senior Fellow in 1717 during his absence. In 1721, Berkeley published *An Essay Towards Preventing the Ruine of Great Britain* in reaction to what has been called the bursting of the South Sea Bubble. After incurring significant national debt, the South Sea Company was instituted to take over much of the debt and reduce it through trade. The Company managed to manipulate an increase in the price of its stock, leading to a proliferation of other companies, some of them illegal. When the “bubble” burst the stock of the South Sea Company plunged. Many, including Ministers of the Crown, were brought to trial in this scandal which led to poverty and disorder. In this *Essay*, Berkeley points to the more general decline in moral and religious values; he argues that the only source of wealth is work and that luxury ought to be curbed by laws.

In late 1721, Berkeley earned the degrees of B.D. and D.D., and he was also appointed Divinity Lecturer. During this time, he again began to seek a preferment. He initially applied for the Deanery of Dromore, with the support of the Duke of Grafton, which would have allowed him to retain his Fellowship at Trinity. However, the bishop of the diocese had another man in mind, leading to a conflict. Ultimately, Berkeley applied for the Deanery of Derry in late 1722 when a vacancy came open. In 1724, he was installed as the Dean and resigned his Senior Fellowship at Trinity after 24 years.

Disappointed with the moral state of Old Europe, in part dismayed by the South Sea Bubble, Berkeley began to conceive a plan for missionary work in the New World. His plan was to build a college called St. Paul’s to educate students to become clergymen. His aim was to

reach both the colonial folk as well as the natives who were to become missionaries to their people. Berkeley selected the questionable location of Bermuda partially due to its equal proximity to the major colonies.

Berkeley began working on this plan in earnest in 1724, publishing *Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations*. He also wrote the poem *America or the Muse's Refuge, A Prophecy* (1726), which includes the following famous (and now eerie) stanza:

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way;
The four first Acts already past,
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day;
Time's noblest Offspring is the last.¹²

Between 1724 and 1728 he worked to garner support for his project. After obtaining a charter and a promise of £20,000 from the British Parliament, Berkeley set sail for America in late 1728. He lived in Rhode Island (near Newport) in the house he built, called Whitehall, which still stands to this day. In 1731, however, he realized that the grant he was promised would never be paid to him. Just before sailing to America, Berkeley married Anne Forster. During their stay in America, Anne had two children: Henry and Lucia. Lucia died just before the Berkeley's return to London.

While his "Bermuda Scheme" generated considerable enthusiasm and support (by the likes of Jonathan Swift, for example), it was also significantly flawed. While equidistant to the major colonies, it was very far away from the mainland (600 miles) so native Americans would have to be convinced to make the long trip to St. Paul's. While these considerations no doubt helped sink the project, the political maneuverings which occurred behind the scenes were also considerably more complex.

While Berkeley's Bermuda project ended in failure, his visit to America had its own successes. Berkeley had traveled to Rhode Island in order to wait for the grant payment, and he lived there for almost three years. During that time he composed *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher* which he published in 1732. Aside from *Alciphron* itself, Berkeley promoted philosophy in America. His American friend and correspondent Samuel Johnson (not to be confused with the English Samuel Johnson) generated a correspondence with Berkeley

of considerable philosophical and scholarly merit (1729–30). Indeed, Johnson went on to write his own *Elementa Philosophica* (1752) which he dedicated to Berkeley. He became the President of what would become Columbia University (King's College) and was the instructor of the great American theologian Jonathan Edwards (1703–58). Moreover, Berkeley promoted both Harvard and Yale by donating to them a considerable collection of books. And the city of Berkeley, California is named after the Irish philosopher.

Instead of returning to Derry, Berkeley lived in London for two and a half years, where his son, George, was born in 1733. Given the Bermuda failure, it was imperative for Berkeley to await royal approval in order to determine his next steps (so it would not have been appropriate for Berkeley to return to Derry). In 1732, he anonymously published his highly regarded *Alciphron* which reached a second publication the same year and was publicly commended by the Queen. A powerful Christian apologetic, this work addressed philosophical and theological issues such as the freedom of the will, human knowledge of God, and the Divine Mysteries. In 1733 Berkeley published *The Theory of Vision . . . Vindicated and Explained* in response to a published letter which criticized his *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (which was republished together with *Alciphron*). Berkeley's response (published as a tract) was only rediscovered in 1860.

During this same year, Andrew Baxter published his *An Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Soul*, which included a chapter that offered the first sustained critique of Berkeley's immaterialism (a critique to which Berkeley did not reply). What is most notable is a change in climate: During this time there seems to have been some increase in serious engagement with Berkeley's philosophy and even a new found respect for it. By 1739, Hume had recognized Berkeley as a *great philosopher* in his *Treatise of Human Nature*.¹³

In 1734, Berkeley's wait for royal approval was over: he was granted the Bishopric of Cloyne. That year, he traveled to Dublin where he was consecrated Bishop. During this time, Berkeley published a second edition of the *Principles* and a third edition of the *Dialogues*. Both editions contain important revisions including Berkeley's use of the term "notion" in a more technical way, and the addition of two exchanges between Hylas and Philonous concerning whether the rejection of material substance ought to lead to rejection of spiritual substance. Berkeley also published the *Analyst* or

a Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician, which provoked considerable controversy among the mathematicians. In this work, Berkeley powerfully criticized the calculus of both Newton and Leibniz, thereby making a notable contribution to 18th century. As the controversy unfolded, he published *A Defense of Free-Thinking in Mathematics* and *Reasons for not Answering Mr. Walton* in 1735.

The Latter Period: Bishop Berkeley

Berkeley lived in Cloyne and served as its Bishop for 18 years. There he fathered four more children (John, William, Julia, and Sarah). Between 1735 and 1737, Berkeley published *The Querist* in three parts (a work concerning politics and economics comprised entirely of questions), earning his place among Irish nationalists. In his contribution to the theory of money, Berkeley urged, among other things, the creation of a National Bank. In late 1737, Berkeley visited Dublin for a meeting of Parliament to speak against an antitheistic society called The Blasters (a group associated with the Hellfire Club). While in Dublin, Berkeley also wrote and published *A Discourse Addressed to Magistrates and Men in Authority* (1738) against this group.

In 1744, Berkeley published his (at the time) widely celebrated *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-water and Diverse Subjects Connected Together and Arising One from Another* (which went through six editions in six months). The erudite and mysterious work blended Berkeley's views about tar-water (and the actual process for producing it) with reflection on physics, metaphysics, and medicine. Tar-water is produced from an infusion of tar into cold water which is supposed to extract from tar what were considered its medicinal virtues (such as the capacity to cure fevers and other ailments). Berkeley based his views on experimentation. Tar-water became wildly popular yielding increasing reports of its apparent value; and Berkeley speculated that it might be a panacea. While Berkeley's celebration of tar-water has been the object of considerable mirth, as A. A. Luce has pointed out it was reasonable for Bishop Berkeley to be concerned with the health of the poor in Cloyne. And it continued to be listed in the British Pharmacopoeia well into the 20th century, from which we can conclude that Berkeley was hardly alone in his beliefs.

THE MAN AND HIS PHILOSOPHY

In 1745, the final Jacobite rebellion brought unrest in Ireland, and Berkeley responded by raising troops and purchasing equipment for them, as well as writing letters (including letters to the Roman Catholics of his diocese) against the rebellion. In 1749, Berkeley published *A Word to the Wise*, asking all Roman Catholic clergy of Ireland to put aside differences and work toward the good of the country, and in 1750 *Maxims Concerning Patriotism* was published. In 1751, Berkeley lost his son William who died at the age of sixteen; this struck at the Bishop quite deeply.

In 1752, Berkeley traveled to London where he lived for five months before dying there. He apparently moved to London to supervise the education of his son, George. There, he published the third edition of *Alciphron*. Berkeley removed the sections of Dialogue VII, *Alciphron* in which he argues against abstraction. Some have imagined this to indicate an “about face” on one of his central doctrines: The issue is obviously controversial. And he also published *Miscellany* which includes some of his old work along with *Farther Thoughts on Tar-Water*. In 1753, Berkeley died, while his wife, Anne, read to him from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. He was buried in the chapel of Christ Church.

SECTION TWO: BERKELEY’S PHILOSOPHY

Philosophical Perplexity

While some have viewed Berkeley as an extremely counterintuitive philosopher with no good arguments to support his claims,¹⁴ others have considered Berkeley a *great* philosopher—not least of which was David Hume.¹⁵ And although the crude picture of Hume as *merely* the empiricist successor of Berkeley has been largely discredited, it remains true Hume was influenced by Berkeley in very profound ways. Indeed, it is worth noting Hume endorsed the opposite (but equally legendary) view that Berkeley’s arguments are actually *irrefutable* (although entirely incapable of producing any conviction)—a view also mentioned by James Boswell and Thomas Reid.¹⁶ Notably both extreme representations—Berkeley as fool and Berkeley as genius—centralize this profound opposition to common sense.

What one perhaps wants is a less dramatic and somewhat more moderate assessment of Berkeley’s philosophy. Certainly, it is easy to

misunderstand a philosopher, and I am afraid Berkeley is one very good example. Yet while I do think Berkeley has been a victim of serious caricature and misrepresentation, I don't think Berkeley can be plausibly understood as offering a philosophically cautious and unsurprising account of the world. Moreover, I think the outrageousness of Berkeley is part of what is so captivating about him. Philosophy tends to be at its most gripping when it shocks and unsettles. And radical views from exceptionally intelligent philosophers are often indicative of the emergence of deep and troubling philosophical questions—perhaps due to profound shifts in how the world is conceptualized. Such was the early modern period which was characterized by the impact of the rise of modern science upon the older (largely Aristotelian) account of reality.

Berkeley himself, especially in his major philosophical work, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), develops the view that his own position is much *closer* to common sense than those of his opponents. On the face of it, of course, this seems only to be adding insult to injury (or heaping the ludicrous upon the unbelievable). Yet there have been important interpreters of Berkeley who have found a way to see a more palatable Berkeley, so the question is not so easily dismissed.

That being said, Berkeley's views about common sense are complex. While the Berkeley of the *Dialogues* really does seem especially interested in restoring philosophers to common sense, the Berkeley of the *Principles* also proudly endorses the view that one ought to "think with the learned and speak with the vulgar" (*PHK* I §51). One example of "speaking with the vulgar" offered by Berkeley, is that we continue to say the sun rises and sets, despite the fact that it is not the sun but the earth that is moving. This proud endorsement, however, raises the real possibility that on several philosophical issues, Berkeley's commitment to common sense is merely verbal. The worry is that while Berkeley's own considered ontological views may differ in serious ways from the views of the common folk, that nonetheless the *speech* of the common folk is to be preserved, but only for propriety's sake.

Unsurprisingly, a recurring motif in the literature has been a split Berkeley, a kind of Janus Berkeley. On the one hand, we seem to have Berkeley the man of the people, friend of the masses, and defender of common sense, while on the other hand we seem to have Berkeley

the metaphysician, philosopher, and chief source of outrage and perplexity.

One good way to frame this tension is to recognize that for Berkeley there is an important contrast between the views of those he calls the “vulgar” (or the common folk—the “illiterate bulk of mankind” as he sometimes calls them) and those he calls the “philosophers” (the learned, the men of speculation). This distinction, equally important to Hume, plays a significant role in the orientation of Berkeley’s own view. He explicitly aims to show where both the vulgar and the philosophers fail; to reconcile the parts that he accepts and to, in some sense, go beyond both. This obviously raises an interesting question about the very positioning of Berkeley’s intellectual efforts: To what extent would he seek to describe them as part of the enterprise of philosophy at all? To what extent is he advocating a return to the views of the vulgar? Berkeley’s positioning of his work presents itself as a kind of third option that is neither quite of the vulgar nor quite of the philosophers. In this way, Berkeley’s work poses interesting metaphilosophical questions about the nature of philosophy itself, and its relationship to common sense and the views of the ordinary person.

BERKELEY’S METAPHYSICAL ACCOUNT OF THE WORLD: AN OVERVIEW

Immaterialism

Berkeley’s immaterialism is a negative thesis which denies that matter exists (more strongly it denies that the notion of matter is intelligible). Berkeley doesn’t simply mean one thing by the term “matter.” Rather, he recognizes that it can be used a host of different ways and he aims to undermine materialism in *any* way of understanding it. Indeed, Berkeley imagines that the term is used in shifting ways in order to preserve the materialist thesis in the face of arguments to the contrary.

Yet Berkeley also argues against the views of the vulgar and the philosophers specifically. He identifies a core form of materialism—that the everyday items which comprise the world (e.g., tables, trees, cows) are the causes of our sense experiences. According to the vulgar view, the everyday items that we immediately perceive are mind-independent causal powers. The philosophers, by contrast, understand

matter as an unperceived substance in which the sensible qualities we perceive exist (or “inhere”). I therefore distinguish between vulgar and philosophical materialism.

Analogously there is a contrast between both vulgar and philosophical accounts of perception. While the vulgar suppose that we immediately perceive the everyday items themselves, the latter suppose that we immediately perceive only our private ideas which resemble, and therefore allow us to “mediately” perceive, the properties of the material substance. We can call the former “naïve” (or “vulgar”) realism and the latter “philosophical” (or representational) realism. According to Berkeley, while the vulgar do not appreciate that their objects of immediate perception are mind-dependent ideas, the philosophers falsely suppose that ideas are not real things, but merely representations thereof. Berkeley’s explicit intention is to reconcile the two views by maintaining we immediately perceive the real things themselves, which are nonetheless mind dependent.

Spirits and Ideas

According to Berkeley there are only two kinds of thing: spirits and ideas. Spirits are simple, active beings which produce and perceive ideas; ideas are passive beings which are produced and perceived by spirits. The everyday items which populate the world (tables, trees, etc.) turn out to be nothing but collections of ideas and as such, they are dependent upon spirits for their existence.

In defending this view, Berkeley is effectively maintaining that spirits are the only substances (i.e., fundamental beings) which exist. Matter is rejected and everyday items depend upon spirits for their existence. Thus, in addition to Berkeley’s immaterialism (his denial of matter), it will also be worth speaking of his spiritualism (his affirmation that spirits are the only substances).

According to Berkeley, one is immediately aware of one’s ideas along with one’s own self. However, this seems to leave one in an entirely private or egocentric world. Consequently, Berkeley initiates a second, more advanced stage of his idealism, which moves beyond what is given to our immediate awareness. Berkeley accomplishes this by trying to demonstrate the existence of God. He also maintains that we can infer the existence of other human spirits as well, although here the conclusion is less certain. One’s awareness of one’s own self

can provide some understanding of what these other spirits must be like.

Using God as the foundation, Berkeley then aims to maintain the existence of an external, public world in the face of this pressure toward subjectivism. The resulting picture is one in which human spirits and God are connected together through communicative exchange, while the everyday items of nature are causally inert signs which facilitate this communication. God himself is immediately causally responsible for the things we sense-perceive, which are related together as signs to things signified. As such, they are part of a communicative system whereby God directs our conduct on a daily basis. Part of the picture involves the view that God perceives everyday items independently of our own sense-perception of them and that, as a consequence, these items are somehow still public.

As I conclude this chapter, let me briefly return to the shocking character of Berkeley's account: Why would Berkeley maintain the everyday items are nothing but collections of ideas? How does one drive a *motorcycle*, if it's only a collection of ideas? Ideas don't seem nearly *sturdy* enough! It is perhaps not so surprising that Samuel Johnson famously kicked the stone in order to refute Berkeley. Alas, he was not successful, since according to Berkeley, Johnson first saw a visible idea (of a rock) and when he moved his leg in a kicking motion, experienced the tangible ideas resistance and pain in his foot. Berkeley's theory nicely explains Johnson's attempted refutation. It also explains why Johnson (rightfully) supposed that upon seeing the visual idea and then kicking, he would experience the feelings of resistance and pain in his foot. The visible and tangible ideas are both immediately caused by God. However, in learning their regularity, we can predict that upon seeing certain visual ideas and acting accordingly, we will thereby experience certain tangible ideas. We are simply responding to the Divine Language, which we have long ago mastered.