Berkeley’s God and solipsism

O Deus de Berkeley e o solipsismo

El Dios de Berkeley y el solipsismo

DOI:10.34117/bjdv10n5-007

Submitted: April 01st, 2024
Approved: April 22nd, 2024

Vegitha Reddy
PhD in Philosophy
Institution: Mahindra University
Address: Bahadurpally, Hyderabad, India
E-mail: vegitha@gmail.com

Aman Tripathi
PhD in Philosophy
Institution: Independent Researcher
Address: Hyderabad, India
E-mail: atphilosophy@yahoo.com

Parameshwar Rama Bhat
PhD in Philosophy
Institution: IIT Bombay
Address: Powai, Mumbai, India
E-mail: parameshwar1951@gmail.com

ABSTRACT
In this paper I provide a meta-analysis of Berkeley’s argument of ‘esse est percipi.’ – to be is to be perceived. I also propose an alternative way Berkeley, could have solved the problem of solipsism without invoking God. I borrow from Wittgenstein’s use of language - to overcome the solipsism of the beetle thought experiment. Similarly, one could also think of escaping solipsist framework of Berkeley by invoking the notion of web of concepts.

Keywords: solipsism, god, argument, esse est percipi, beetle, language, thought experiment, inter-subjective.

RESUMO

Palavras-chave: solipsismo, deus, argumento, esse est percipi, besouro, linguagem, experimento de pensamento, intersubjetivo.
RESUMEN
En este artículo presento un meta-análisis del argumento “esse est percipi” de Berkeley. - Ser es ser percibido. También propongo una forma alternativa en la que Berkeley podría haber resuelto el problema del solipsismo sin invocar a Dios. Tomo prestado el uso del lenguaje de Wittgenstein para superar el solipsismo del experimento mental del escarabajo. Del mismo modo, también podríamos pensar en escapar de la estructura solipsista de Berkeley invocando la noción de una red de conceptos.

Palabras clave: solipsismo, dios, argumento, esse est percipi, escarabajo, lenguaje, experimento de pensamiento, intersubjetivo.

1 INTRODUCTION

One of the pertinent enquiries that philosophers pursue is the relationship between the self and the world. A commonsensical view of the world compels us to take the world to be material in nature. We see lands, water, trees, animals, sky, roads, cars, etc. out there. They are part of a material world which is different from the world of ideas, thoughts etc., which are mental. A crucial question for philosophers is: how are our world of ideas, thoughts and mental life linked to the material world out there? This question has baffled philosophers for ages and even now seems to haunt them.

The empiricists believe that our basic thoughts and ideas have their roots in experience. Locke tried to bridge this gap by introducing the distinction of primary and secondary qualities.¹ Primary qualities exist independent of the observer and are objective. Secondary qualities are generated in the interaction between subject and object through sense organ and hence are partially subjective. They are color, taste, smell, sound etc. On reflection, it becomes clear that primary qualities cannot be observed but can only be known through secondary qualities. For example, the shape of an object can only be known either through visual perception or through touch, which are secondary qualities.

Berkeley² denies the concept of primary qualities. By denying primary qualities, one cannot know anything objective. All that one could know is only secondary qualities which are perceived and stored in the mind. From this Berkeley concludes that the only legitimate claim we can make is that the mental world is real. Thus, he says that ‘esse ist percipi’ – to be is to be perceived. By modus tollens, it follows that if it is not perceived, it does not exist. That is to say, all things that are not perceived do not exist. Berkeley

argues that if we know things only through our sense perceptions, then it would follow that only perceived things are real. This was a serious problem for Berkeley. How to explain things that are there even when we are asleep? When the question about the ontological status of a flower in the forest where no one is watching it arises, Berkeley could only bring God to sanction existence to such a flower by making him perceive this flower. Thus, God came to the rescue of Berkeley’s philosophy to establish ontological status to objects in the world.

2 META-ANALYSIS

In this argument, Berkeley offers a criterion of reality. Reality is known only through sense perception and existential claim cannot be made for anything unknowable through the senses. The consequence of this is that metaphysics has to be linked to epistemology and existential claims regarding Nirguna Brahman, thing-in-itself, transcendental ego, unconscious mind etc. cannot be legitimately made.

Berkeley seems to be aware of the danger of he becoming a solipsist and therefore he invoked the notion of God to find a way out of it. By bringing God to help him, Berkeley linked his epistemology to theology. If a philosopher is an agnostic or atheist, then he would find Berkeley's philosophy unacceptable.

Berkeley has the difficulty of distinguishing perception and memory. Memory can be recalled, but perception cannot be recalled. Perception is involuntary. If sound is produced, we perceive sound even if we do not want to listen. Perception could take place involuntarily. To claim that we need attention to perceive something is not to deny the involuntary nature of sense stimulus that hits our nerve endings. The careful placing of the perception vis-à-vis the other mental states and processes would have helped Berkeley to overcome the solipsistic conclusions without bringing in the God. For instance, the manner in which Wittgenstein overcomes this solipsistic position could have been developed by Berkeley. By invoking the language, Wittgenstein could overcome subjective solipsistic position. All that is subjective filters out and we get an intersubjective framework at the level of language. The word ‘beetle’ we could use in our language even if each one of us does not know what is there in the boxes of others in the
thought experiment of beetle.³ This is the specialty of language that it can work even if individual experiences are idiosyncratic.

3 BEETLE THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a 'beetle'. No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word 'beetle' had a use in these people's language? – If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something: for the box might even be empty. – No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

The above thought experiment shows how to get out of individual solipsistic perspective. If experiences that we have are private, then naturally we are led to the private worldview. There is nothing other than the private experience that we know since we know about the world only through our sense perceptions. This is exactly Berkeley’s position where he brought God to overcome the solipsist position. The above passage gives us an idea how one can overcome the solipsistic worldview. If the word ‘beetle’ has any use, it would not have the use of naming anything since the object drops out if others are not able to verify. In terms of the pain sensation, there would be no object of pain sensation, but only pain as a predicate. This gives us the ability to communicate between individuals ascribing pain to a third person while perfectly understanding the use of the term ‘pain.’ That is to say, from a solipsistic position to inter-subjective position one could move on and speak sense about other minds.

Alternatively, one could also think of escaping the solipsist framework of Berkeley by invoking the notion of web of concepts. Conceptual interconnections go beyond the subjective and solipsistic framework. As we know, universals are inter-subjective and similarly thought could be inter-subjective. Using such framework, i.e., web of concepts or logical features of thoughts, one could go beyond solipsistic framework and save the situation without invoking the notion of God.

³ Wittgenstein, L. (1999), §293
REFERENCES


