

On Berkeley's Arguments With Regard to Realism and Idealism

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Abstract:

We consider the arguments of Berkeley against the thinkability of realism. We show that in fact Berkeley's assumptions do not merely lead to the conclusion that realism is unthinkable, but that in fact Berkeley's argument implies that idealism is also unthinkable, and leaves only a weak version of solipsism remains as a thinkable ontological position. From this, we argue that it is not possible to eliminate realism using the type of argument employed by Berkeley, unless one is willing to accept solipsism. The consequences for the conceptual possibilities which should then be thinkable as a result are discussed.

Introduction

Bertrand Russell credited Berkeley with being the first philosopher to show that the position of idealism may be held without contradiction (Russell, 1997). However, in addition to this, Berkeley also attempted to show that realism was absurd, because it required concepts which could not in fact be conceptualized (1977). From this, Berkeley concluded that idealism was not merely possible but necessary, or at least necessarily the only theory we could understand. That is, he concluded that we are epistemologically forced to renounce realism in favour of idealism.

We will commence by defining a number of terms which will be necessary or convenient for our exposition. We will proceed to give a succinct logical version of Berkeley's argument, in order to illustrate the precise set of assumptions which are required. We will then show that using a parallel argument the same assumptions also prove that idealism as Berkeley conceived it is also not well defined. Then we will discuss what conceptual possibilities are naturally opened for ontology if Berkeley's assumptions are rejected. In particular, it will be claimed that if one admits that one can avoid solipsism in favour of idealism, then it is reasonable to think that one can also define realism.

Definitions

Let us first define realism and idealism, as we intend to use those terms. We will take *realism* to

mean the ontological position that there are things which exist that are neither minds nor ideas in minds. We will take *idealism* to mean the ontological position that everything that exists is either a mind or an idea in a mind. We may also define *solipsism* to be the position that everything that exists is either me or my ideas. Later we will consider a particular form of solipsism which is more extreme in that it asserts that we cannot even speak of ‘me,’ but only of ‘these ideas collected together.’

A concept will be said to be *concrete* if it may be defined ostensibly: that is, if all its conditions may be defined by direct (positive) comparisons with collections of particulars. In other words, we may compare an object with the minimum collection of properties held in common among some collection of particulars, but we may *not* use the negation of these properties, unless the negation of the property in question is something for which we also have an exemplar particular (this is what is meant by the *positivity* of the comparison). We will say that a concept which is not concrete is *abstract*. Let us define a concept to be *thinkable* if it is possible to conceptualize that concept in a meaningful fashion. A concept is *unthinkable*, then, if it is not thinkable.

Berkeley’s Argument Against Realism

We are finally in a position to give Berkeley’s argument. Berkeley indeed only required one assumption for his result, namely:

Assumption B: Every concept that is thinkable is concrete (Berkeley, 1977).

Although Berkeley did not explicitly phrase his assumptions this way, this contains the essence of his argument. Indeed, depending on how one wishes to interpret Berkeley’s treatment of universals, this may actually be a relaxation of Berkeley’s original assumption. Russell for example argues that Berkeley implicitly denied that one could form concrete universals through comparisons, which itself creates a number of philosophical difficulties since it results in an inability to define any concepts whatsoever. For a further discussion of these matters, see (Russell, 1997). However, such issues are not important for our current discussion. It suffices to observe that assumption B is at most a relaxation of

Berkeley's assumptions. We now come to our first main result.

Theorem 1: The realist concept of *being* cannot be concrete (Berkeley, 1977).

Proof: Everything of which we are aware may be said to be. However, each thing of which we are aware involves the 'awareness of a mind.' This notion of 'the awareness of a mind' is therefore one of the (positive) properties held in common among any collection of particulars of which we are aware. Therefore it is part of any concrete concept. But the realist notion of being explicitly requires that this not be a part of its definition. QED.

Corollary 2: Under assumption B, the realist concept of being is unthinkable.

Note however that Thm. 1 does not depend upon assumption B; it holds under any set of assumptions.

This result, in any case, is what Berkeley believed that he had shown. However, the argument goes far deeper. Before we examine this, however, we should make one observation. Berkeley originally restricted thinkable objects to particular ostensible objects. However, as Russell pointed out, the notion of similarity (positive comparison) is not itself a particular ostensible object (1997). This is because each instance of similarity must be similar to each other instance, by some similarity which applies to each of the pairs of similarity. But that is therefore not one ostensible comparison. Therefore, what we said above may be thought to depend upon a relaxation of Berkeley's assumptions, since we allow this notion of comparison to apply to things universally.

The Extension of the Argument To Idealism

The careful reader may have noticed that our proof of Thm. III.2 in fact involved an implicit assumption, or rather, that there was something which was not well-defined. Indeed we failed to give consideration to the precise meaning of 'awareness of some mind.' It was this error which led Berkeley to believe that he had shown that only realist being was unthinkable, and caused him to fail to realize that his argument is in fact much stronger. Let us discover what sort of concept of *being* we may obtain,

while restricting ourselves to simple concepts.

First, we will define a new concept. Hume and Nietzsche both argued that we cannot even conceive of the *self* as being (Hume, 2004; Nietzsche, 1968). All we have are these ideas, which exist for-us, but the *us* apart from its being *for-us* is not in fact thinkable. In fact, then, our only notion of the self, according to both Hume and Nietzsche, is that of this conglomerate of sensation-ideas which we have together with the self as it appears to us, and the only notion of *being* which we may have, or the only concrete notion, is the notion of ‘being an idea for-me.’ Merleau-Ponty also asserts that this is the only notion that being can have for us (2006). All of these philosophers provided a degree of argument for this, but both also allowed that we were somehow able to ‘project’ the notion of the self behind these. Therefore, it became unclear whether they actually were asserting that the notion of the self was unthinkable, or whether they were only asserting that it was never concretely encountered. In any case, we will call this conception of being the *Hume-Nietzschean concept of being*. For our purposes, we may assume that any notion of the self other than the self-for-me is not thinkable in this position.

Theorem 3: The only meaning of being which is concrete is the Hume-Nietzschean version.

Proof: The proof is virtually identical to the proof of Thm. 1. Every particular of which we are aware is therefore something which is an idea for-us. Therefore the set of common properties among any collection of particulars includes ‘an idea for-us.’ But then ‘being for-us’ is in fact the only notion of being left to us that is concrete. QED.

Corollary 4: Under assumption B, only the Hume-Nietzschean concept of being is thinkable.

But note that this means that we cannot even conceive of being-for-others under assumption B. Therefore, assumption B leads us to solipsism, and not merely to solipsism but to a very limited sort of solipsism where we cannot even conceive of our own existence except in terms of our particular ideas. We have therefore shown

Theorem 5: Assumption B leads to the sort of solipsism defined in the previous paragraph being

the only thinkable ontological theory.

Consequences

Now that we have shown where assumption B leads, let us discuss the consequences of this fact (Thm. 5).

We may, if we wish to do so, retain assumption B and accept the form of solipsism that we are left with. Of course, by doing so we do not assert that this sort of solipsism is *correct*, but only that it is the only sort of thing we may think of and describe.

However, this sort of a result will seem rather unpleasant to most philosophers. It follows that we must reject assumption B in favour of some other postulate. If we reject assumption B, then there is no reason why idealism is unthinkable. However, rejecting assumption B results not merely in the possibility of idealism being thinkable, but *also* in the possibility of realism being thinkable. We are therefore left with the following question: is it possible to nonetheless assert that idealism is thinkable, but not realism?

The answer is, of course, yes. However, this ‘yes’ has a certain caveat, in that while it is certainly possible to make such an assertion, the price of the assertion will be high. For example, let us say that we allow ourselves a certain degree of negative comparison in order to speak of being-for-others as well as being-for-us. If we do this, it is unclear why this sort of abstraction is permissible, but the similar abstraction to the being-in-itself of realism is not permissible. Similar considerations apply to other methods of obtaining a definition for being-for-others. If we wish to also think of minds existing in-themselves, it becomes even further muddled why only minds should have this privilege. Therefore, such an assertion as a Berkeleyian philosopher might like make becomes a seemingly arbitrary one. Whereas assumption B has a certain elegance to it which gives it some appeal, we have now descended into *ad hoc* assumptions designed solely for the purpose of retaining the consequence of Thm. III.1.

However, whether or not it is logically possible to remain a Berkeleyian idealist (in the sense of

holding to idealism and *also* denying the thinkability of realism), a more relevant question might be whether or not this is in fact true. Obviously we cannot discover this through simple logical analysis. The question before us is two-fold. First, it asks us whether or not the concepts which are components of idealism are thinkable, and second, it asks us whether or not the concepts which are components in realism are thinkable. Now we cannot answer this question by simply asserting postulates, unless we first have verified these postulates by phenomenological investigation.

It therefore follows that the ultimate test of the thinkability of both idealism and realism, and indeed of any concept or theory, lies in the phenomenological consideration of our own conceptualizations. In the opinion of the author, obtained through phenomenological studies of his own concepts, both are in fact thinkable. However, the concepts of being-for-others and being-in-itself are not concrete, and nor are they reducible. That is, they cannot be defined by taking a collection of simpler concepts and joining them together. For this reason, it is impossible to communicate what being-for-others or being-in-itself are. This should not be surprising: we cannot communicate the concept of *redness* to another, but no one will try to assert that this is an empty concept. In a pair of related examples, it is impossible to define causation by reducing it to static concepts, and also impossible to reduce the concept of libertarian free will to other forms of causation; these concepts must be grasped directly (Pink, 2004). In fact it will be seen, without much difficulty, that we in general communicate by assuming that there are certain irreducible concepts in common between us. However, a discussion of this lies beyond the scope of this paper; some work in this area may be found in (Wittgenstein, 2001).

We may give a description of two processes of conceptualization which may lead to the realization that realism is thinkable. One method has already been hinted at. If it be granted that there is some nontrivial method by which we conceptualize the *other* used in idealism (where by ‘nontrivial’ we mean that it is not simply the case that this concept comes to us as if it were an inborn idea), then this same method may be applied to abstract our way to the concept of things-in-themselves. The other

method depends upon the concept of causation-for-us (which some have denied, but which is discovered by us phenomenologically in the author's opinion). By abstraction from this causation, as well as from objects-for-us, a causally-acting object may be defined without reference to the for-us. This type of being may then be assigned to any object generally. However, in either case, the irreducible concept of being-in-itself must simply be grasped: being irreducible it cannot be defined in other terms. It is even possible that some will be able to grasp it almost as though it *were* an inborn idea, or as easily as a person gazing out a window observes the weather.

With any method, the relationship between being in-itself and for-us may be understood as follows. Objects that we perceive (that is, which enter the relation with us of being for-us in some way) are then perceived in the revelation of their being-in-itself; thus the being of a causal entity involves its causal power which can then be perceived, and likewise a sense datum has a type of being which enables it to be revealed through a sensational perception. Both cases are identical: the perception of the object reveals the essential being of the object by letting it be for-us as well as in-itself, and it is able to be perceived as it is because of what it is in-itself (that is, what it is in-itself is simply what we may perceive it as).

The ability of an object to be perceived in a certain way (e.g. as a causal entity or a sense datum) is not a separate or additional (causal or other) power in addition to its other properties or aspects, but rather the fulfillment of a necessary condition for an object to be revealed in a perception (instead of simply existing *as* a perception as in Berkeley's idealism). To wit, if one way for an object to be for-us is to be in a relation of having some (other) sort of being revealed to us, and if a revelation must have some non-empty content, then that thing must have some (other) sort of being as a necessary condition (in the logical sense) in order to be revealed (but of course, being perceived/revealed is not a necessary condition in the logical sense or the causal sense or otherwise for it to be; that is part of the point of being-in-itself). It is of course the case that these perceptions are generally caused by other conditions

which must be fulfilled in order for the possibility of a perception to be actualized. Therefore, the (independent) existence of the object is a necessary condition, in the logical sense, for a perception in the revelatory sense to occur, and so it is also necessary in the causal sense. However, it is not a sufficient condition in either the logical or the causal sense (the object and the perceiver might set certain sufficient conditions that must be met, however). Of course the being which is revealed could be theoretically something other than being-in-itself, for example in some theories a being-as-perception for another mind being revealed to us. However, in many realist philosophies, such as that of Whitehead, there are no instances of pure being-as-perception at all, and an object being for-us is always the being-in-itself of the object being (in-itself) revealed to us (whereby in such theories there is only one kind of being that actually occurs, being-in-itself; some might even claim that any other conception of being, such as pure being-as-perception, is not well defined, that is, not thinkable) (1978).

For example, a green sense datum which we perceive is both green and perceived by us. In this perception-relation its greenness is revealed, and because it is green, it is logically able to be revealed in a perception-relationship (it may have other properties as well which are left out of the perception of course): it could not 'be perceived (through being revealed)' unless it also 'is' something else as well. In this way the notions of being are brought full circle and united into one.

Now all these considerations above are possible by the same types of abstractions which are needed to escape solipsism. Furthermore these types of considerations are required in many realist philosophies, such as that of Whitehead; what is essential then is that it is thinkable (1978). It is of course thinkable by the fact that once we reject solipsism, the types of abstract conceptualization required are no longer naturally forbidden, by the argument which forms the body of this discussion, which implies therefore that these types of realism should be thinkable, provided that we can evade epistemological solipsism. Similar considerations will hold for various types of idealism, which will

also be potentially thinkable. Of course, simply because these theories are thinkable does not mean they are correct; such a determination can only be made through a phenomenological analysis of our perception-experiences, to determine if they are revelations of other sorts of being as said above, and if there is only one sort of being. It may even be that we cannot have phenomenological certainty in these areas, though it must be noted that such certainty is logically possible, for if the phenomenological analysis shows that the being of the object of the perception does not depend on the perception or the analysis itself then this being must really be either for-someone-else or in-itself. However, the point is that our analysis of Berkeley's argument indicates that there is probably no convincing reason to say that these theories are not thinkable, provided only that we allow ourselves to escape solipsism.

It should be mentioned that some might object that, if being for-us is a revelation of being-in-itself, then we cannot think of anything without it existing in-itself. However, this is easily seen to be incorrect. Indeed the same difficulty faces the idealist: if we think of a person, they must therefore exist, since by this reasoning they are perceived by us. Yet they must therefore also be capable of experiences themselves, if they really are a person, which is absurd, unless we wish to admit that each of us by thinking of a fictional being thereby makes them as real as we are. The solution is to consider descriptions via concepts, as is done in (Russell, 1997).

Note that some might try to define being-in-itself through necessities along: what must be seen if we look for it, for example. However, the being of this necessity must first be defined (and cannot be simply something which would be seen if we looked for it, for this is a circular definition), and then there is no reason this being cannot be given to objects as well as these necessities.

It should be noted that whenever we make an abstract conceptualization, we do tend to also have a sensation-image of some particular exemplar. This, perhaps, was what led Berkeley, Hume, and the other skeptical empiricists to deny that we have abstract conceptions at all. Similarly, they looked for notions such as causation occurring without themselves, in, for example, the motion of the arm (Hume,

1999; Nietzsche, 1968). It is no wonder, then, that they failed to see an exemplar of the concept. To find exemplars of causation it is necessary to begin by looking inside the mind itself, and the relation of the mind to its sensations and ideas. However, a detailed phenomenological exploration of these matters would take us too far afield; for a more detailed discussion of the phenomenology of causation (and the associated methodological errors of the skeptics in this regard) the interested reader may consult (Whitehead, 1978).

Conclusion

We set out to consider the full implications of Berkeley's argument against the thinkability of realism (1977). We have shown that this argument in fact denies not only the thinkability of realism, but also of idealism, and in fact restricts us to the Hume-Nietzschean type of being as the only thinkable kind. It follows that any attempt to maintain Berkeley's result must use an assumption which is weakened, but we have argued that such a weakening is quite inelegant unless it also permits the thinkability of realism. We have also considered the consequences for the thinkability of realism if we assume that we are able to abstractly conceptualize sufficiently to evade solipsism, and determined that it is reasonable to think that most forms of realism are thinkable, although any such final determination must be made phenomenologically.

However, the ultimate decision of this issue must depend solely upon consideration of what we phenomenologically find in our conceptualizations. This unfortunately is not the sort of study that can be logically proven from one person to another. Nonetheless, we have suggested that both realism and idealism are fully thinkable, but not reducible to other concepts, even under the assumption that such concepts as 'necessity' are available to us.

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Apodictic Evidence: An Extension

Published as a comment to the paper

This paper leads to the very natural question of whether or not there could ever be apodictic, that is, certain, evidence for the existence of things with absolute being in the sense discussed. For while the existence of such things can be theorized about, and may be true, we are also interested in the epistemological question of whether or not we can know of their existence. Whether it is possible for humans to do so can only be explored introspectively, but it is possible to answer this question in the affirmative in theory.

Consider an experience, say, of a visual field involving a green square. This event has the form of ‘conscious green square experience.’ The precise ontological nature of the event may not have any more clarity than that: it might be that the green square is a quality qualifying the mind (Hume, 2004), an object whose only being is ‘to be perceived’ or ‘to be my idea,’ (Berkeley, 1977; Schopenhauer, 1966), a subjectless and objectless ‘event’ and no more (Nietzsche, 1968), or it might be an absolutely

existing conscious mind being in a relationship of knowing with an absolutely existing field of sense data (Russell, 1997; Whitehead, 1978). However, it is absolutely certain that it is *some kind* of ‘conscious green square experience,’ as Descartes pointed out as well (2006).

Now what would be necessary for apodictic evidence of an absolutely existing object? Clearly, such evidence would consist in there being an event whose form is consciously given as ‘consciously experiencing an absolutely existing object with properties X1, X2... by an absolutely existing mind.’ If the event is so given for consciousness, then, since it has that form for consciousness, it must really have that form, just as an event that has the form of ‘consciously experiencing a green square’ must really have that form. But now, if we suppose that this ‘experiencing an absolutely existing object’ were anything other than such a relation between an absolutely existing mind and an absolutely existing object, then it would not have the very form that it is given with and therefore has. That is, the event has the form ‘experiencing an absolutely existing object,’ but that form includes the absolute existence of some object with those properties. Of course it must really be given to consciousness with that form and not merely posited. One can after all posit theories by communicating forms that events or things can have without there actually being some event or thing with that form, so long as there is something which *expresses* that form. But just as we cannot be mistaken that our visual experience is a ‘green square experience,’ so likewise it is theoretically possible that a mind should be given an experience which, as given, fits the form of ‘experiencing an absolutely existing object.’ Through this method one could have direct experience (in the sense of Russell, 1997; note that in some of his later works Russell diverged from that notion of experience, and we do not mean to indicate those later notions) apodictic evidence not merely for sense data, but also for causal entities, relations between entities, or anything else. For example, our experience of a green square could be a relation between our own absolutely existing ego, which is capable of experiencing, and a field of sense data, which exists independently of being experienced and is, in this relation, known and experienced by us. A conceptualization might be

the experience by us of some independently existing object which does not exist in the form of the concept we conceive, but rather communicates that concept without actually having the properties involved in that concept. Similar considerations apply to all our experiences, and even to the possibility of other sorts of minds experiencing things like physical objects (quantum fields, for example) which it seems unlikely that we directly perceive. Some exploration on whether humans actually have such experiences was done by Whitehead (1978).

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