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Nada Shokry

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Reality in the Eyes of Descartes and Berkeley

By: Nada Shokry
5/21/2013
AUC - Philosophy
“One person’s craziness is another person’s reality.” — Tim Burton

This quote best describes what one finds out when studying how two great philosophers, like Descartes and Berkeley, think about the world as two distinguished versions or standards of reality yet with the same starting point and the same goal. Both – Descartes and Berkeley – were religious, believed in God and were against atheism. This means both had the same goal of trying to convince people not to avoid involving God in their lives. They also agreed on the facts from which their different explanations are derived and deduced. These unquestioned facts they built upon their conclusions are that all what we experience or perceive immediately in our lives are ideas that passively happen to us without our interference. For instance, I cannot help but see the keyboard when looking at it now. This is something I experience by the senses which are direct empirical evidence. However, Berkeley has a different hypothesis than Descartes’ when trying to explain these facts and deducing mediate theories about their causes. This essay will discuss the arguments provided in the theories of both philosophers to explain reality, what the motives and the results of these theories are and my opinion about them.

Descartes begins in his first meditation to destruct all opinions he had and “raze everything to the ground” (First Meditation, 18) in order to reach what cannot be doubted and the thing that he can be 100% certain of. Using this method he found his first undoubted fact: As long as “I” is thinking “I” must exist. Similarly, Berkeley – represented by Philonous – begins with attacking and destructing the old theory of Descartes – represented by Hylas – about the cause of the ideas. He, then presents an alternative theory that he thinks is more plausible. So, what is the theory of Descartes, why does Berkeley think of it as “repugnant and inconsistent” (Third Dialogue, p.66) and what is his alternative view?
Descartes distinguishes between two concepts: the image of an object and the object itself. In other words, for him there exists two kinds of realities: Formal/Actual Reality (= the world of things) and Objective Reality (= the world of Ideas ). According to the law of conservation of matter, both realities should match. Similar to chemical reactions, what is written before the arrow should be equal to what is written after it so as nothing would be created out of nothing. If I now get the image of the keyboard in my head (objective reality) it must be because there is a keyboard in the outer world (formal reality) and not two or zero. Descartes also distinguishes between two other concepts: Primary properties of objects and secondary ones. He argues that the essence of the objects is primary properties that cannot be perceived by the senses whereas the secondary which can be perceived are not real. He gives the wax example to explain that all the secondary properties of a wax, such as color, shape…etc., change when heating it yet it is still wax because of its primary properties that we cannot sense. This was considered the first step towards Modern Science which suggests that everything is made out of Atoms. Berkeley, however, thinks that this gap between sensible ideas and reality gives rise to skepticism and eventually leads to craziness. This is because, according to Descartes, real does not mean sensible, because senses are not always right. Hence, what is real exists but we do not sense it. Berkeley also finds it a frightening idea to think that the outer world or the matter which signifies “extended, solid, moveable, unthinking, inactive substance” (Second Dialogue, p.51) to be the cause of our ideas. The reason for this is that it gives rise to Deism which is the belief of God as a creator and nothing else even if it is unintentional of Descartes. God may have created the world and left it work by itself without him watching. Therefore, Berkeley denies Descartes’ theory and starts arguing how secondary properties — heat and cold, tastes, odors, sounds and colors —and primary ones as defined by Descartes — extension, motion and solidity — do not exist outside the mind. He uses the same argument for all the properties which is their relativity. He gives an example for each property to defend his point, e.g. that one
can put his two hands into the same water and feels the water to be cold with one hand and hot with the other. Or what is considered to be solid for one animal is soft for the other….and so on. So, according to Berkeley, there is no reason to believe that there is a fixed unchanging reality in the outer world rather than everything is relative. There is no need to believe and it does not even make sense to believe that an unperceivable material substance that materialists cannot even describe is the reality and is the cause of our ideas rather than actually believing what you see, feel or touch. This way, the paradox and contradiction of a physical thing, like the brain, causing a non physical thing, which is the mind and ideas, is avoidable. Consequently, I think, if there was a contest for the evidences both provide, Berkeley, the man of “Common Sense” (Third Dialogue, p.63) would win as he uses direct empirical evidence which are the senses. “…In short, you do not trust your senses, I do” (Third Dialogue, p.33). So, if there are no primary properties that are the cause of our ideas, where do our ideas come from, according to Berkeley?

Because everything is relative, this means that reality only exists in our minds. There is no outer world, there are only ideas. Objects exist because we perceive them. They exist in our ideas. Everything we see, hear, feel or touch are things we perceive by the senses which are ideas. How is it possible, however, to explain that I now exist as I am sitting alone in my room typing on the keyboard and nobody is seeing me nor perceiving me in any way? Berkley gives an answer to this question as he says there must be an “omnipresent eternal mind” (Third Dialogue, p.64) who perceives everything and who is the cause of our ideas. This way, he can get rid of Deism by putting God in the center as he is in control of everything in our lives. Now, as God is not something you can perceive, how does that differ from Descartes’ argument that the unperceiving matter is the cause of our ideas and is the reality?

“I do not deny the existence of material substance, merely because I have no notion of it, but
because the notion of it is inconsistent…” (Third Dialogue, p.66). Berkeley thinks that it makes no sense to think that something which is inactive, passive and perceived rather than perceiving, such as matter, would cause something active and perceiving, such as the mind where ideas come from. Because ‘I’ thinks and ‘I’ exists, ‘I’, the soul or the mind must be active, perceiving and immaterial. We, the thinking things, are finite created spirits whereas God is an infinite, 100% active and perfect spirit. So, what is more reasonable to believe? God, the infinite active spirit to be the source of our ideas, or matter which is passive and not perceiving?

Descartes and Berkeley have different approaches to prove God’s existence other than the previous. Berkeley’s “Argument from Design” suggests that the world we perceive is so complex, perfect and beautiful that it cannot be created by coincidence. He does not know God immediately, but through deducing his existence from the ideas he experience. He thinks that we deprive the beauty of creation when we believe in Materialism. Another argument he uses, is that the ideas of everything are particular except the notion of God as we did not experience or perceive it unlike all other ideas. When I think of Computers, I imagine a specific computer and not a general one. There are no general ideas except for the idea of God who is a spirit. Descartes, however, proves the existence of God through a chain of consequences ‘Causal proof’. Because of the law of conservation of matter, the cause must equal the effect, if we have an idea of God than this idea is the effect and God is the cause. The idea we have of God is an innate idea that we did not produce ourselves. Although both arguments, that of Berkeley and Descartes seem similar, Descartes proves the existence of god as a result of a physical or scientific law, unlike Berkley who deduces the existence of God through the ideas he is experiencing: the beauty of nature….etc.

When explaining why there is evil in the world, if God is the one who causes all the ideas,
both Descartes and Berkeley have the same answer. All the evil in the world is our production through our behavior. God created us and gave us free will even in the world of ideas to choose the wrong or the right way. This is because, e.g. putting someone to the death penalty for committing murder is the same physical act as murder itself but the reason and moral motive is different. So, God cannot be blamed for every action we take as it is when believing in Materialism.

Both Berkeley and Descartes agree on the division of ideas to consist out of perception and judgment. We cannot be mistaken about our ideas but we can be about the inferences we make about these ideas. I may think that something is solid from a distance but when I come closer I see it is liquid. The idea was not wrong, only the inference.

At the end, there lies the question: Why is it not possible that materialism and idealism co-exist? Why is not God controlling everything through creating materialism which cause our ideas? Berkley’s answer is that God, the infinite perfect all powerful spirit, does not need an “instrument” (Second Dialogue, p.52) for us to have ideas. Why should there be material substances?

I think, both philosophers, were successful at making their shocking or bizarre conclusions, convincing or at least plausible through their good irrefutable arguments. Descartes depends on physical laws and undoubting inferences of facts in his conclusions which are logical while Berkley depends on having the best evidence and on Common Sense that there is no better reason to believe in another theory other than his. This is specifically clear in his argument about the impossibility of the coexistence of Materialism and the controlling God. As I was studying Descartes I had no reason to doubt any of his conclusions or arguments. The same happened to
me while studying Berkley, though both theories seem extreme, ‘Materialism or Idealism’. However, I also do not see a reason why I should take the facts that they both agree on as granted, that what I experience is just an idea. Why separating reality in ideas and causes of ideas? Why are sensible things separated from reality?