

BERKELEY'S IDEALISM - INTERNAL REALISM AND THE INCOMMENSURABILITY - THESIS

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Introduction

Some philosophers, the common people and scientists think that the world is constituted by objects - animate and inanimate. They really exist in the world whether we know them or not. Their existence and nature do not depend on us. This view is well known as realism. Celebrated kinds of realism are materialism, causalism, experimental realism etc. Though they are different kinds of realism, they all advocate mind-independent reality.

Some philosophers denying the realistic approach have tried to establish their views by saying that without mind the world is empty. The existence of the world depends on mind. This view is called anti-realism. Idealism, Positivism, Pragmatism etc. are well known types of anti-realism. At present, Internal realism of Putnam, Incommensurability theories of T.S. Kuhn and P. Feyerabend are also popular as forms of anti-realism.

In this paper, my aim is not to compare realism with anti-realism. What I want to do is to throw some light on Internal realism of Putnam and Incommensurability theories of T.S. Kuhn and P. Feyerabend in the context of Berkeley's idealism.

Berkeley's Idealism

Bishop Berkeley at first refutes the so called realistic approach that the world consists of a totality of mind-independent objects by saying that objects are mind-dependent for their existence. Only perceivable objects are real. Objects which cannot be perceived have no existence at all. Sometimes we imagine some objects but we can not perceive them. So they are not real. He argues that only the sensible objects or things or ideas are real.

Idea is identical with object or thing or quality to Berkeley. He says, "Ideas actually (1) imprinted on the senses, or else such as are (2) perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly, ideas (3) formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways."¹ Berkeley is known as an empiricist on the question of knowledge while he is known as an idealist on the question of reality. He has tried to equate epistemology to metaphysics by saying that *esse est percipi*² means existence depends on perception. If a thing is perceived or known, it would be real. Human mind and super mind i.e., God are the subjects of perception or knowledge.

According to Berkeley what we can notice, touch, feel, drink, eat are real. We can never deny their existence. But what we can never touch, drink, notice, eat etc. are not real at all. For example, skyflower, unicorn, square circle etc are not real objects or ideas. Our mind, even super mind can never perceive them. Sensible ideas or things are the signs of God's purpose. He teaches us by using these signs or language.³

What is the way to communicate with each other if reality is mind-dependent? To answer this question Berkely argues that God feels us similar sense experience in similar contexts : so that we can communicate with one another. If you saw a tree where I saw an elephant and the next moment you saw in that place a sofa and I a bushal of apples, we would not be able to communicate. But by correlating the series of your experiences with mine God makes predication and communication possible.⁴

Natural sciences do not explain the physical world. They can only describe the world. Because we have no mind-independent physical world. In sciences scientists only can report what they observe but cannot say anything about unobserved events. Sense experiences are only correlated with each other in science. Berkely also thinks that there is no causal or necessary connection between two events. All causal statements are nothing but statements of correlations of experience. So, he argues that science is possible. But we can never say that science gives us true knowledge of mind-independent objects. The laws of nature are nothing but the manifestation of God's will. They are manifested in the orderlly series of our sense experience. In this context he says that The great Mover and Author of Nature constantaly explaineth himself to the eyes of

men by the sensible intervention of arbitrary signs, which have no similitude or connexion with the things signified⁵. He also argues that we cannot produce "unity" and "intelligibility" from God's mind.

So, in brief, Berkeley's argument is that God creates ideas or things to manifest Himself to our senses. All these ideas are real whether we perceive or not, for all the ideas are sensible to God. But the ideas that our mind creates are not sensible and so, they are not real. Science only can report on the objects or ideas which we can perceive. God also correlates the ideas in such a way for which we, though we have different mind, can perceive them equally. That is why we can communicate with each other and science can give us a description of our sense experience which is universally accepted.

If we eliminate the idea of God from Berkeley's view then it would be as follows :

Sensible objects or ideas are real because our minds perceive them. And there is uniformity in the occurrence of these ideas so that our different minds can perceive them equally. But this uniformity is not mind-independent. It is also sensible to us. If there is no mind, there is no idea and uniformity of ideas. Our minds are such things which can perceive the ideas equally for which we can communicate with each other though our minds are not the same. Science only reports or describes the sensible ideas and the uniformity of ideas. But it is only possible if our mind exists. Without mind, science is meaning less. In the presence of mind, science only can report the sensible ideas or the uniformity of ideas of mind.

Internal Realism of Putnam

Hilary Putnam does not clearly state about the reality of the so called external objects anywhere in his writings. He is well known as a linguistic philosopher. But from his philosophical discussion it seems to us that he is not a realist about external objects. To him the objects and the signs that we use to refer to the object are mental. Our mind carves up world into different objects and creates different signs to refer to the objects. There is no necessary connection between signs and objects. Within a conceptual scheme what sign is used for

what object is a matter of convention. Persons having a certain conceptual scheme can classify the world into different objects according to their own conceptual scheme and they can name them differently.

The classification of the world in different objects and signs may be different to the persons having different conceptual schemes but they would be same to the persons having one and the same conceptual scheme. For example, the sign H_2O is used for water. Only scientists and the students of science who have the same conceptual scheme know that H_2O is used for water but a layman who holds any other conceptual scheme may not use H_2O to refer to the object water; rather he may use some other sign to refer to the object called 'water' in English. Thus it follows that there is no necessary connection between sign and object. So, Putnam argues, ".....signs do not intrinsically correspond to objects, independently of how those signs are employed and by whom. But a sign that is actually employed in a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects within the conceptual scheme of those users."⁶

From the above argument it is clear to us what Putnam wants to say is that signs are used to refer to the objects conventionally. But it does not follow that the objects are mental. We can identify Putnam as an anti-realist when he says "objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes, we cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description."⁷

We classify or divide the world in different parts according to our own conceptual schemes. Our conceptual schemes may differ from each other. In different conceptual schemes the classification may be different. That is why, we can never say that the objects have mind independent existence in the world.

Both signs and objects are mind-dependent for their existence. They are mental or internal to the conceptual scheme. Hence, Putnam accepts the internal reality of the world and he himself calls his realism as internal realism.

Someone may argue that Putnam's internal realism supports Locke's representative realism and Kant's empirical realism. According to our conceptual scheme we perceive our mental ideas which are the images of the real entities, but the real entities are unknown and unknowable. Like Kant, Putnam thinks that we cannot know the reality through our experience. But we can understand by reason that reality is transcendent to us. We can never know it. The reality is

unknown and unknowable to us.

But we cannot accept the above criticisms. Because Putnam himself says that like signs, the objects are internal. Like signs, we also discover objects. But Locke and Kant do not say anywhere that objects are discoverable. They argue that objects are unknown and unknowable while Putnam says, "objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description."⁸ Rather we may argue that Putnam's argument is similar to Berkeley's view about reality. Like Berkeley he argues that we perceive the world or we interpret the world according to our mental capacity having a certain conceptual scheme.

Putnam has tried to show that his realism is different from Berkeley's idealism by explaining Berkeley's idealism in the following way.

A Comparison Of Berkeley and Putnam

For Berkeley, nothing exists except mental entities. We observe the physical qualities according to our mental ideas. The physical qualities and the mental ideas or images are identical. This view is called subjective idealism. Against this view Putnam's argument is that physical qualities cannot be similar to mental ideas or images. Only one mental sensation or image can be same as another mental image or sensation. Putnam says, "Physical length and subjective length must be as different as physical redness and subjective redness."⁹

It seems to me that Putnam has misinterpreted Berkeley's idealism. In Berkeley's idealism it is not said that mental ideas are the images of physical objects and we perceive the physical objects according to our own mental ideas. What we find in his idealism is that ideas and the things or objects or qualities are identical. For example, we may take water as idea or thing. But all ideas or things which are sensible to us are created by super mind. On the other hand what ideas our mind creates are not sensible in anyway. We also do not claim that Berkeley is a subjective idealist. For he himself argues that we are totally bound to perceive and to take up the ideas or objects identically to communicate with each other. The super mind or God forces us to take up his created ideas or objects harmoniously for communication. From this argument, it follows that though Berkeley is an idealist, he is not a subjectivist. Rather we may argue

that Berkeley's idealism is similar to what Putnam wants to express through his internal realism.

Incmmensurability Thesis Of T.S. Kuhn : A Berkeley Interpretation

T.S. Kuhn is well-known as a historian of science. But he has also tried to develop a philosophy of science. We consider his works as of historico-philosophical importance. From his writings "*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*" and "*The Essential Tension*" what we come to know is that by rejecting the relativistic approach he has tried to establish the reality of the world which is unknown to us. We observe the real world from different angles because of our different paradigms or conceptual schemes. Different communities have different paradigms. Observation, experimentation and theory construction, are activities determined by mind which possess a certain conceptual scheme or a paradigm. When a man shifts from one paradigm to another paradigm then all his activities would undergo a change according to the new paradigm.

In his book "*The Essential Tension*", to show that theory totally depends on the minds of the members of a community he argues : "a new theory has been tested over time by the research of a number of men, some working within it, others within its traditional rivals. Such a mode of development, however, requires a decision process which permits rational men to disagree, and such disagreement would be barred by the shared algorithm which philosophers have generally sought."¹⁰

Theory, Kuhn says, does not present or reflect the real world' it represents our thinking which is dominated by a certain paradigm. So we cannot say that new theory is closer to truth than the old one.

Kuhn, is not a subjectivist though some of his critics identify him as a subjectivist by saying that he is the defender of the view that the world is like what the members of a community observe or think it to be. Kuhn rejects this criticism against him by saying that he does not advocate mind-dependent reality of the world. The view he advocates is that the world is in itself real but we perceive it and we represent it in different ways according to our different conceptual schemes. He says, "Scientific knowledge, like language, is intrinsi-

cally the common property of a group or else nothing at all. To understand it we shall need to know the special characteristics of the groups that create and use it".¹¹

Incommensurability Thesis Of P. Feyerabend : A Berkeleyan Interpretation

Feyerabend is also an incommensurabilist. He thinks like Kuhn that observation, experimentation and theory construction are mind-dependent. A scientific community constructs a theory to describe the world which the members of the community observe within a conceptual scheme. The theory constructed by them can give a true account of the world which they observe within a conceptual scheme or mental set up. Different communities have different conceptual schemes. Even a certain community may have different conceptual schemes at different times. But we cannot compare different conceptual schemes with each other. They are incommensurable. Theories and observations are also not commensurable, because different theories are constructed in different conceptual schemes and different observations are made in different conceptual schemes.

Feyerabend says that the world which the members of a community observe as real is not actually real. But they try to describe their observable world as real, by constructing theory. Theory can give a true account of the accepted world but not the actual world. That is why, he thinks that a theory is not a true description of the world, rather it may be accepted as real.

In his recently published article "Realism and the History of Knowledge, Feyerabend argues that man is the only sculptor of reality. We human beings, can tell many interesting stories about reality. Materialists argue that our world is constituted by the material objects which we observe. This observable material world is real. But the spritualists have tried to deny this materialistic approach by saying that this observable world is not real. It is mere appearance. Only God is real. But, now the scientists want to say that our observable world is constituted by elementary particles which we cannot observe. They are not observable but intelligible. Hence he argues :

".....a look at history shows that this world is not a static world populated by thinking (and publishing) ants who, crawling all over its crevices, gradually discover its features without affecting them in any way. It

is a dynamical and multifaceted being which influences and reflects the activity of its explorers. It was once full of gods' it then became a drab material world; and it can be changed again, if its inhabitants have the determination, the intelligence and the heart to take the necessary steps."¹²

A Comparative Discussion And Evaluation

Now I want to compare all the views to show the impact of Berkeley's idealism on them. In internal realism what Putnam says is that the reality is mind-dependent. A man holding a certain conceptual scheme cuts up the world into different parts. If conceptual scheme is changed then the classification of the world would be changed. The classification of the world cannot be external. It is an internal event.

Putnam, I think, being influenced by Berkeley has tried to shed a new light in philosophy of science. But from his internal realism we do not get any new way for which we can say that his view is more appropriate than Berkeley's idealism to refute realism. What he has done is that he calls his view internal realism instead of idealism. Why he has hesitated to use the word "idealism" for his view is that he is not ready to accept God for the reality of the world. On the other hand, Berkeley accepts the reality of the sensible objects admitting the existence of God. While Berkeley thinks that the sensible objects are sent by God to us, Putnam says that we cut up the world into different parts having a certain conceptual scheme.

Berkeley says that God feeds us similar sense experience in similar contexts; so that we can communicate with each other. But Putnam, does not totally deny this view. He does not accept the existence of God and His influence on our sense experience. If we hold a certain conceptual scheme, then our sense experience would be the same. Here we notice that Putnam has highlighted the existence of man and his mental construction while Berkeley has strongly accepted the existence of God and His influence on our sense experience.

If we eliminate the idea of God from Berkeley's idealism then we can not discover any difference between Berkeley's idealism and Putnam's Internal realism. While Berkeley admits mind-dependent reality of the world, Putnam also

accepts this.

Like Putnam, Kuhn and Feyerabend also accept mind-dependent reality of the world. They have highlighted the existence of man and his mind construction denying the existence of God and His influence on our sense experience. In different paradigms we observe the world from different angles and it is observed different worlds. Our observation, experiment, theory construction etc. are totally influenced by our paradigm. That is why when we shift from one paradigm to another then our all activities are transformed in accordance with the change. Hence denying realism they have tried to establish such anti-realism where it is accepted that the reality of the world depends on man who holds a certain paradigm.

Here we do not notice any difference between Berkeley's idealism and incommensurability thesis of Kuhn and Feyerabend. Like Berkeley, Kuhn and Feyerabend accept mind-dependent reality of the world. They argue that we perceive the world according to our own paradigm while Berkeley says that perception depends on us. Like Berkeley, Kuhn and Feyerabend accept what we perceive are real, we cannot deny their reality. But when Berkeley says that our sense experience may vary from person to person, Kuhn and Feyerabend claim that our sense experience would change when we shift from one paradigm to another. Here they added an extra concept which is "paradigm" which is not used in Berkeley's idealism. Though Berkeley does not use the word "paradigm" yet indirectly he has tried to say so. When Berkeley says that God feeds us similar sense experience in similar contexts, so that we can communicate with each other, it seems that though he does not use the word "paradigm", he accepts the concept "paradigm" which is controlled by God. Kuhn and Feyerabend accept man as the ultimate cause while Berkeley accepts God as the ultimate cause. Beside this we do not notice any difference between Berkeley's idealism and incommensurability thesis of Kuhn and Feyerabend on the question of reality of the world.

Conclusion

So, we may conclude from the above comparative discussion that Putnam, Kuhn and Feyerabend have tried to modernize Berkeley's idealism to refute sci-

entific realism. Though they are quite able to modernize Berkeley's idealism, yet I think, their achievements are not much. If a realist can refute Berkeley's idealism, then internal realism of Putnam and incommensurability thesis of T.S.Kuhn are already refuted. The realist may not make further efforts to refute internal realism and incommensurability thesis separately.

NOTES

1. George Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1970). But I have taken it from *A New Theory of Vision and other writings*, Introduction by A.D.Lindsay, London, J.M. Det & Sons Ltd., 1960, P. 114.
- 2.. *Ibid.* p. 144
3. *Ibid.*, p. 129
4. John Hospers, *Philosophical Analysis*, tenth reprint, Allied Publishers, India, 1994, p. 521.
5. *Op. Cit.* p. 144
6. Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 52.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 52
8. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
10. T.S. Kuhn, 'Objectivity, Value Judgement' and Theory Choice *The Essential Tension*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1977, p. 332.
11. T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, 1962, 2nd edn., with Postscript, 1969, p.210.
12. P. Feyerabend, 'Realism and the History of Knowledge'. *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LXXXVI, No.8, August, 1989, p. 204.

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