

‘Language Metaphor’ and Its Implications in George Berkeley’s Philosophy

Abstract

Philosophy since the time of Berkeley has taken many different turns and undergone fluctuations in emphasis, but interest in Berkeley’s thought persists and it is widespread. No contemporary philosopher in any land can afford to bypass him, and many feel compelled to refute him or offer contrasting alternatives if they do not accept his claims. A central feature of Berkeley’s philosophy is his use of a certain metaphor which we can call ‘language metaphor’. This metaphor characterizes natural world as a language through which God speaks to man, instructing him the ways of caring for himself, enabling him to predict the future, and teaching him how to act. This article aims to investigate ‘language metaphor’ and its implications in Berkeley’s philosophy.

Key Words

Berkeley, Language Metaphor, God, Natural World, Teleology.

Berkeley Felsefesinde ‘Dil Metaforu’ ve Onun Akla Getirdikleri

Özet

Berkeley’den beri felsefe, ele alınan konular ve onlara verilen öncelik bakımından birçok de i im geçirmi tir. Bununla birlikte, Berkeley felsefesine duyulan büyük ilgi günümüze kadar devam etmi ve hiç üphesiz edecek gibi de görünmektedir. Dünyanın herhangi bir yerinde hiçbir felsefe ara tırmacısı Berkeley’in dü üncelerini görmezden gelemedi i gibi, onun görü lerine katılmayan ço u ara tırmacı da bu görü leri çürütmeye ve alternatif açıklamalar getirmeye kendini mecbur hissetmektedir. Berkeley felsefesinin önemli bir özelli i filozofun ‘dil metaforu’ ekinde isimlendirebilece imiz bir terimi kullanımı olmasıdır. Bu metafor, tabii dünyayı, Tanrı’nın insana kendine bakıp gözetmenin yollarını gösterme, onun gelece i görmesine imkan sa lama ve davranı larını nasıl düzenlemesi gerekti ini ö retmede kullandı ı bir ‘dil (konu ma)’ olarak nitelendirmektedir. Elinizdeki makale, sözü edilen metaforu ve onun Berkeley felsefesindeki anlamını ele alıp de erlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Berkeley, Dil Metaforu, Tanrı, Tabii Dünya, Teleoloji.

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Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) was a man of many and varied interests. T. E. Jessop ranks him among the most astute economists of his time, along with Adam Smith, Malthus, Paley, Fleetwood and Swift.¹ He was profoundly interested in mathematics, and his criticisms of Newtonian mathematics and physics, especially of the theories of the infinitesimal calculus and absolute space and time are acute and remarkably modern. Because of the thoughts in *De Motu*, famous philosopher of science Karl Popper (1902-1994) has called Berkeley a precursor of Ernst Mach (1838-1916) and Albert Einstein (1879-1955).² Berkeley's researches with tarwater witness his interest in medicine. He is still listed as the discoverer of tarwater which is known today as a patent medicine in England.³

But Berkeley's first and last love was philosophy, especially theology. "Truth", Berkeley says, "is the cry of all, but the game of a few"⁴. And he believes that the search for truth must lead us ultimately to a deeper knowledge of God and our duty to the benefit of our immortal souls. Concluding his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley says: "For after all, what deserves the first place in our studies is the consideration of God, and our duty; which to promote, as it was the main drift and design of my labours, so shall I esteem them altogether useless and ineffectual, if by what I have said I cannot inspire my readers with a pious sense of the presence of God"⁵. John Stuart Mill recognized this 'drift and design' when he wrote: "The war against Freethinkers was the leading purpose of Berkeley's career as a philosopher"⁶. In his day the skeptics and materialists were called the "free thinkers", and Berkeley also labeled them "minute philosophers" because they were so narrow in their outlook. Like many contemporary skeptics, they hailed freedom of thought but were slaves to antireligious prejudices⁷.

There is a theme that haunts the works of Dostoevski: If there is no God, then everything is lawful. In a way this is also Berkeley's theme. He seems increasingly convinced that only the fear of God can make a monster behave like a citizen. The urgency and persistence of his attack on freethinkers was rooted in his fear that the age of monsters was not far off.

It is clear that Berkeley's philosophical system, whatever may be the right textbook label to apply it, was plainly a piece of religious apologetics, the outline of a

¹ Jessop, T. E., *Editor's Introduction (The Querist)*, The Works of George Berkeley, ed. by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, Thomas Nelson and Sons LTD, London 1964, vol. VI, p. 96.

² Popper, K., "A Note on Berkeley as a precursor of Mach", *British Journal of Philosophy of Science*, 4 (1953).

³ Berkeley, *Four Letters and Farther Thoughts on Tarwater*, The Works of George Berkeley, vol. V, p. 165-71.

⁴ Berkeley, *Siris*, The Works of George Berkeley, vol.V, p.164.

⁵ Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. by Roger Woolhouse, Penguin Books, England 1988, sec. 156, p. 113.

⁶ Mill, J. Stuart, *Tree Essays on Religion*, "Berkeley's Life and Writings", Henry Holt and Company, New York 1874, p. 290.

⁷ Berkeley, *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher*, The Works of George Berkeley, vol. III, p. 107.

constructive natural theology, of a theistic metaphysic. From the *Principles* onwards he was fashioning a reasoned case for the existence of God, of a certain kind of God with a certain kind of relation to the world⁸. He felt that an important, if not the most important, value of his works was their success in this respect.

Indeed, in one of his letters Berkeley writes as if such a purpose were fundamental in the sense that his epistemology and metaphysics were formed with an eye to their ability “to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God, the immortality of the soul, the reconciliation of God’s foreknowledge with freedom of men, and by showing the emptiness and falseness of several parts of the speculative sciences, to reduce men to the study of religion and things useful.”⁹ In the Preface to the first edition of the *Principles* he does not emphasize this purpose so much as in the letter just quoted, but even here he says that his philosophy is useful particularly to “those who are tainted with scepticism, or want a demonstration of the existence and immateriality of God, or the natural immortality of the soul.”¹⁰

A central feature of Berkeley’s philosophy is his use of a certain metaphor which we can call ‘language metaphor’. This metaphor characterizes natural world as a language through which God speaks to man, instructing him the ways of caring for himself, enabling him to predict the future, and teaching him how to act. Berkeley was neither the first nor the last to use this metaphor¹¹ but so far as we know, no one else developed it to such a degree, no one used it for such important purposes within a philosophical system. I think it will be right to say that this metaphor, which is really a complete theory, is the keystone to George Berkeley’s ontology, epistemology, and religious philosophy.

In *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* Berkeley states that our percepts, or objects of vision, constitute a language of the Author of nature: “Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life.”¹² And again, in *Siris*, he speaks of natural laws as a ‘grammar’ for understanding the ‘rational discourse’ of nature¹³. In between these first and last works, in everything of philosophical relevance that he ever wrote, the metaphor recurs again and again.

⁸ Tipton, Ian C., *Berkeley*, Thoemmes Press, Bristol 1994, p. 297-98.

⁹ Berkeley, *Letter to Percival*, March 1, 1710, *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. VIII, p. 31.

¹⁰ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p. 35.

¹¹ There have been some philosophers and theologians before Berkeley who accepted natural world as the language of its Author. The best known of them is Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). See, Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas, ed. Anton C. Pegis, The Modern Library, New York 1948, p. 15, 423-432

¹² Berkeley, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. I, sec. 147, p. 231.

¹³ Berkeley, *Siris*, *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. V, p. 120.

We see in *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained* that Berkeley expands upon this view in the following way: "The objects of sense, being things immediately perceived, are otherwise called ideas. The cause of these ideas, or the power producing them, is not the object of sense, not being it self perceived, but only inferred by reason from its effects, to wit, those objects or ideas which are perceived by sense. From our ideas of sense the inference of reason is good to a Power, Cause, Agent."¹⁴ And in the next section: "Hence it follows that the Power or Cause of ideas is not an object of sense, but of reason. Our knowledge of the cause is measured by the effect, of the power by our idea."¹⁵

These quotations have a great importance for our study. They are excellent as an introduction to a few of the more basic aspects of Berkeley's theology. First, it is clear that Berkeley postulates the principle of causality, and though he does not state it here, he assumes as another premise the proposition that any external cause must be mental or spiritual in character. Second, the inference to God's existence and attributes proceeds from perceived ideas, as effects, to an external cause¹⁶.

Again, though we do not see it stated here, Berkeley has another implicit axiom or postulate; that our perceived ideas of sense are inert, or passive, which means that we cannot cause our own ideas and therefore they must have an external cause. This premise may have some empirical basis for Berkeley in that he argues that the only causes of which we have experience are our own motivations and recollections of past ideas, and that, further, we have perceptions which we do not instigate. Finally, he maintains that since we do not directly and immediately perceive God, His character must be taken 'measured' from our ideas, which we do perceive. Thus our knowledge of God is inferential and the inference is analogical.

Now this argument is simple and unsatisfactory. It is further expanded, and made correspondingly more complex, in the *Principles* and in the *Alciphron*. In the *Principles* the doctrine is as follows: "But if we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of the creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all, the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals; I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes, one, eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid spirit, *who works all in all, and by whom all things consist*."¹⁷

In the following sections of the same work Berkeley states: "Hence it is evident, that God is known as certainly and immediately as any other mind or spirit whatsoever, distinct from ourselves. We may even assert, that the existence of God is far more

¹⁴ Berkeley, *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*, The Works of George Berkeley, vol.I, sec. 11, p. 256.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, sec. 12, p. 256.

¹⁶ Olscamp, Paul J., *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley*, Martinus Nichoff, The Hague 1970, p. 14-15.

¹⁷ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p. 108.

evidently perceived than the existence of men; because the effects of Nature are infinitely more numerous and considerable, than those ascribed to human agents...everything we see, hear, feel, or any way perceive by sense, being a sign or effect of the power of God; as is our perception of those very motions, which are produced by men.”¹⁸

It is clear that we here find certain things added to the arguments as presented above from the *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*. Berkeley is not now arguing a simple causal inference from sensed ideas as effects to God as cause. He now has some premises which deal with the order and connection of these ideas. He states propositions concerning the constant order and regularity, the beauty, and the contrivance or purposive relations of the ideas, even to the import of pleasure and pain, appetites and passions.

It is from these propositions that he infers the attributes and existence of God. Of course, only an intelligent and wise creator could make the world so perfect in its harmonious regularity of motion and purposive order. Only a good creator would give organisms pleasure and pain, appetites and passions, so well adapted to the continuance of human species. All order and regularity implies, or is correlated with, intelligence in human experience.

Therefore, by analogy, whenever we find order and regularity we can infer an intelligent creator. Also, whenever we find purposive order without intention we can infer an intelligent creator. Both kinds of order are interpreted as characteristics belonging to machines. The argument then, concerns the inference that since man's machines all have intelligent creators, the world machine must, by analogy, have an intelligent creator.

We see, therefore, a new set of premises in Berkeley's argument. It can now be summarized in the following way: First, there is still the postulate of causality. The order of natural objects, or of ideas, must have a cause. The harmonious and purposive character of these objects implies that the cause is intelligent. Second, the inference proceeds from a premise concerning effects, that is, the order of nature is treated as a set of effects. Third, the ideas that make up the order of nature are inert, that is, passive. They are not a result of our mind's production. This point has a vital importance for Berkeley's purpose, for only with this premise can Berkeley demand an external cause for the existence of ideas of sense. Finally, he claims that the inference is as demonstrative, as certain, as our knowledge of other selves or other men¹⁹.

We may classify this argument as cosmological, because it is based upon the principle of causality and because the inference is from effects to a cause. It must be remembered, however, that the usual cosmological argument has another axiom. It postulates the absurdity of an infinite regress of causes. Such an axiom is not involved in this argument in the *Principles*, and is specifically excluded in the argument in the *Alciphron*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, sec. 147-48, p. 108-109.

¹⁹ Tipton, Ian C., *Berkeley*, p. 318-19.

However, I think that the argument should better be called the design argument. Because it is inference to the existence and attributes of God from premises about the order and contrivance in nature, and this is what the term 'design argument' means. In my view, the design argument is interpretable as a species of the cosmological argument on the grounds already given. Since the argument also makes use of the principle of purpose, it may well be called 'teleological'. This is the import of his remarks about contrivance, about the passions and appetites, about pleasure and pain, and about means-ends relationships in general.

The principle of purpose, then, is made use of by Berkeley, both as evident in the relations of things in the world of nature, the means-ends, process-product relations of things, and as intentions in the mind of God. Therefore, since purpose is involved at both ends of the causal inference, the argument can be correctly designated 'teleological'.

We have noted that the argument proceeds from effects to cause. The world of nature, both in the sense of regularity of events and their connections, and in the sense of purposive relationships, is treated as an effect or set of effects from which one can infer the character of its cause. Thus the argument is properly called 'a posteriori'. This is the meaning of the term a posteriori given it by Berkeley in his discussions of Newtonian physics.

Finally, Berkeley's argument is analogical. Because it proceeds particularly upon the principle of analogy in the sense of the machine. All machines are produced by intelligent creators; the world is analogous to men's machines, therefore it has an intelligent creator. Further, the argument makes an analogy between our knowledge of other selves and knowledge of God. Our knowledge of God is analogous to our knowledge of other selves. And it has, for Berkeley, as much certainty and immediacy as knowledge of other selves.

This analogy points up the major difficulty in understanding Berkeley's argument. What did he mean by certainty? And, what kind of certainty did he associate with this argument? It would seem that the best way of solving the problem would be to study his ideas about the certainty which attaches to our knowledge of the existence of other selves. But, this method is made impossible by the fact that Berkeley nowhere discusses the nature and certainty of our knowledge of other selves. Thus we are left hanging on this problem.

In many of his works we read that Berkeley believed the knowledge of the existence and attributes of God to be demonstrably certain. He says his argument about the existence and attributes of God is demonstrative and certain, if we take his statements together²⁰. If we take demonstrative certainty to belong to sensed ideas, then he might be interpreted to hold his design argument certain because it is based upon a premise about sensed ideas as effects, and from this certain to infer the existence of God as cause.

²⁰ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge* (preface), p. 35

But this would seem to be in disagreement with other statements in which he says that certainty and demonstration belong only to verbal arguments²¹. If we take him to mean by 'demonstrative certainty' something which belongs only to verbal arguments based on definitions, then we seem to have a disagreement with the view that certainty belongs only to sensed ideas, and also with the position taken on the arguments for God's existence; for these arguments do not appear to be based on premises which state such definitions.

If we take him to mean by demonstration arguments based on premises which present intuitively self-evident propositions about the order of nature or effects in nature, then we seem to have a disagreement with his stated view that propositions about nature and its laws are conjectural and probable. If we take him to mean that his design arguments are probable, this meaning seems to disagree with his view that everything said in the *Principles* is demonstrative, and with some statements in the *Alciphron* which tend to show that he believes the existence of God to be certain and demonstrative.

The conclusion appears inescapable: There is no consistent position taken by Berkeley on the matter of demonstration and on the matter of certainty. If we are to state simply, he says several things about the ground of certainty that do not seem to be compatible. Sometimes the ground of certainty is placed in intuition, sometimes in sensed ideas, sometimes in definition. In the early part of the *Principles* he puts intuition and definition together. Yet at other times he claims certainty for the existence and providence of God and excludes intuition.

We should say something about Berkeley's belief that his metaphysics is so apt to theology. To be clear on this point I think it is best to review certain propositions which he uses in his theology and show how they fit into his general philosophical position.

First, there is his postulate of causality. He connects it with a further postulate which states that all causes are mental, and this postulate is connected in turn with another which states that all sensed ideas are inert and passive. All these postulates are important in Berkeley's metaphysics, and they are also fundamental to his theological arguments. Put them together, and Berkeley believes that their combination forms a perfect ground for arguments to the existence and attributes of God. It is in this sense that Berkeley thinks his immaterialistic philosophy so apropos to theology.

Once having destroyed materialistic theory, Berkeley believes that all other ways of explaining the order and contrivance of our ideas of nature are gone except one- a designing, creating God. If our ideas are passive their existence and order demand a cause, and the cause must be mental. If all causes are mental, then there is no possibility of explaining this order by means of material objects. If, on the other side of the coin, there are no material objects, or no material substratum, then matter cannot be used as an explanation of the order of nature. God is the only way of explaining the order and contrivance exhibited in laws of nature.

²¹ See Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 380, *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol.I, p. 46; *Principles of Human Knowledge*, sec. 107, p. 93.

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