

PROOF OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD: AN ANALYSIS

RATIKANTA PANDA

This world is not only the ground, but the very survival-condition of a man's life. Not only that a man lives and passes his entire life here, but that, no living and surviving is possible outside the frontiers of this world, although what this frontier can be, is debatable. The third planet from the sun in the solar system, which we call Earth. The manned probing satellite, i.e. spaceship with human beings for exploration, enhances the chances of our survival outside the earthly boundaries, and thus helps us in extending our living frontiers.

From time immemorial certain metaphysical and related questions have bothered human mind about the existence of external world. Many questions are posed to provoke philosophical discussion on this topic. "Is the world only an appearance or a true reality?" If it is a reality, is it an outcome of collation of gross atoms or both gross and subtle atoms? Why did I come to this world and did I have a choice to refuse? Is it the law of *Karma* of the earlier births in the past made us to come? What made Shakespeare to ask "The Tempest" that the world is a dream? Why did Buddha find this world as full of miseries and sufferings? Why did Schopenhauer talk in whispers to plants, flowers and shrubs and then bent his ears to get reply to his metaphysical question from these plants? His questions to plants related to "who he was?" and other similar inquiries. After all why these search to know "thy self", not only by Schopenhauer but also earlier by Socrates and still earlier by the ancient Vedic seers, sages and metaphysicists?

A philosopher may wonder whether there is an external world or not. He might ask whether these frontiers really exist. Or, to be more specific, does this World really exist? What if this World is not existing, and we are living in a perpetual illusion? While in dream, we feel that dream world is real, but when we wake up dream is sublated by the dawn of reality. The dream is no more! What if the world too like dream gets eventually sublated? Sankara would have said '*Brahma satya, jagat mithya*' i.e. the only reality is the *Brahma*, and the World is an Illusion!

We perceive the external world through our senses, and our senses often deceive us. It is natural to ask if the senses give us correct picture of the world at all. We often hallucinate, mirage. Because of such experiences, we tend to ask ourselves,

if our senses do not deceive us all the time. What if the whole world is a product of our senses' malfunctioning? What all of this is a dream?

Not only that the world has troubled Indian minds, but this was no exception to Western mind as well. The external world, with all its sensuousness and enigma, has baffled the philosophical mind in every era. The doubt regarding existence of the world has kept on assailing the philosophers, although they were literally living in it. Philosophy is an endeavor to discover the relationship that man holds with his cosmos. And a philosopher's task does not get exhausted with just querying. He has to answer that query as well! If the world is an illusion, then how so? And, if it is real, then how can we prove it? This is the crux of the matter of problem of proof of external world.

Different philosophers have looked at this problem differently. Heraclitus (535-475 BC), the ancient Greek philosopher, saw this world as a flux. A reality which is ever changing, "*ta onta ienai te panta kai menein ouden - All beings going and remaining not at all.*"¹ The world is like a continually flowing river, and you cannot step into the same river twice. "*We both step and do not step in the same river. We are and are not.*" He did not see, however, any necessity to prove this momentariness of the world around. There is no much point in finding a proof of something which is but only momentarily. Buddha too felt that the world is a continuity of successive moments, and beyond which there is no reality.

Although, the world may be existing momentarily, still we live in it for years. That means, there is enough scope for continuity. Before us, hundred thousand of men and woman lived in this world. The world with all its momentariness was still there, as it is now. Even if one steps out of the metaphysician's stream, and looks at our immediate tools of apprehending the world, using own our senses, we find that world is something, which does not exist in its own right, but depends on our perception.

It was Descartes, however, and not ancient Greeks, who raised the question of the existence of external world. That is, whether the world, independent of our mind, exists or not? Descartes (1596-1650) considered only two sorts of substances: the mind, and the body. The mind is un-extended and body is being extended in

¹Heraclitus, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heraclitus#Panta_rhei.2C_.22all_things_flow.22

space. If body exists, surely the existence of the totality of bodies can be called world. It was the God from whom the two substances, mind and body emerged. Our senses cannot give the proof of the external world, for senses often delude us. It is God only who can ensure the existence of the world. The concept of God itself is the proof of its existence.³² There are only three different perspectives possible:

- 1) There is no external world at all
- 2) There is external world, but we cannot prove its existence
- 3) There is external world, and we can prove its existence.

The most radical position, that is, the first one, was taken up by David Hume. Hume denied the existence of world altogether. No transcendental object can be the cause of what is non-transcendent. The fleeting impressions which is the only reality admitted by Hume cannot be, however, the cause of permanent, and independently existing world out there. Our constancy and coherence of experiences make us think of the existence of some objective world out there, but whether it really is, we cannot know. As Hume says:

This propensity to bestow an identity to our resembling perceptions, produces the fiction of a continued existence; since that fiction, as well as the identity, is really false....²

Thus, however, our perception shows us that there is a world with which we interact. Its just a coherence in our perceptions every time that we deduce the existence of the world. Nothing besides the sense experience is real, and all that we call the world is existing because we perceive it. In fact, we cannot know if *anything* exists at all independent of our perception. We can be sure of *our* experiences, but how can we know, if other people have same experience? At best our senses can prove to us, but do not as a provide proof for others. Hume takes us too far till the logical limit of his empiricism. If we cannot prove that world exists with which our senses interact every time, how could we be sure that it is the *same* world that our senses come in contact every time? This hypothesis of Hume engenders the continued existence of world. Howsoever constructed by imagination it may be, the continued existence of the same objects which he experiences at various times, based on

² A Critical History of Western Philosophy by Y. Masih, Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, New Delhi, p-206-9

coherence and constancy in his experiences he would not be in a position to prove the external world. He remarks, the mountain, the house, the table, the bed,

...have always appeared to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration...³

Further, Hume accounts for only his own experiences, and not experience of other. That means if there is no one to perceive the world, surely there is no world at all! There remains no world with which anyone's senses may come in contact, and then subsequently the question of the proof of its existence may not arise. The skeptic's position stems from the fact that the two personal experiences and physical objects are different. One can be sure of the personal experiences. From this, it cannot be validly concluded that there is an external world. Further, there are others like Berkeley and Kant who maintain that there is surely a world existing outside of our minds, but it is something that we cannot prove. Berkeley considers world to be the ideas in the mind of God. Thus, there is external world, verily, outside the confines of individual mind, but it exists in a Higher Mind as its Idea, which is God. But existing as idea does not mean that it does not exist objectively. Y. Masih, notes in this regard,

'In the mind' need not mean that things have their locus within the ego. It really means that a thing has entered into the knowledge-relationship with the subject. When we say that nothing can be outside the mind, it means that the subject-object relationship is so universal and pervading that nothing can escape it... So, Berkeley instead of subjectifying things tries of objectifying ideas.⁴ Note what Berkeley says himself, "I am not for changing things into ideas but rather ideas into things."⁵

Kant, as compared to Berkeley, takes a more straightforward approach to the issue of the existence of the external world. He first examines the conditions which can make the knowledge of external world possible. The world outside corresponds to the conditions of space and time, and when we perceive the world our experience proves that such a world exists. But, certain features of it still delude us like space-as-such, or even world-as-such. For this, Kant concludes that this things-as-such cannot

³ Ibid, p. 194-95

⁴ Y. Masih, Ibid, p-306

⁵ George Berkeley, Dialogues i:463

be proved, because these go out of the general framework of space-time categories only within which the existence of anything can be established. Within spatio-temporal framework, things come to us as phenomena, and outside of it they are called *noumena*. Phenomena can be proved through our direct experience. *Noumenal* cannot be proved through experience. They are transcendental. But, we can deduce the existence of them using transcendental argument, although, we cannot *prove* them. Thus, Kant proves the external world, both empirically and transcendently

In fact, the two positions regarding non-evidence and self-evidence of external world have given birth to a much larger debate and divide the western philosophy into between empiricism and rationalism. While rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz held the view that we are intuitively aware of the outside world, but cannot prove it; empiricists like Locke, Berkeley etc. held that we can verily prove the world, as our senses directly confront it. Hume is the only one among the empiricists who reduces senses to the extreme position that one cannot step out of sense experience to reach out to the world. That is, one cannot be sure, whether any knowledge about the world-as-such can be had by anyone using sense experience. Rationalists are mainly criticized on the ground that their intuitive awareness of the world can be give tautological truths like that of mathematics and logic. For example, $a = a$, but tautology cannot give contingent truths about the world, such as it is raining outside. Such truths can be known only by experiencing directly those events.

There is yet another philosophical view point namely, common sense which maintains that there is world verily, and it is proved by our own simple experiences. And this is the position, which I too want to argue for. We need not juggle with high sounding philosophical arguments to prove our world. The simple fact that we live in it, proves that it exists. It is Moore, however, who first of all took this position, which a layman believes all the time, Moore proves it rationally. Moore and layman differ on the ground that, for Moore it comes as something proved rationally while for layman belief in the world comes as something taken for granted all along his life.

Moore takes up the challenge, proves the externality of world from common sense only. He raises his one hand in the air, and says; 'Here is one hand!' puts it down, raises other hand, and say, 'Here is another!' and puts it down. While now no

hand is in the view of audience who had just seen two hands before, Moore concludes that the two hands must have existed to give audience those views. At present, no one is seeing those hands, but everyone had seen them just moments ago, which prove that *two human hands existed just moments ago*. And if the existence of two human hands can be proved, surely the existence of external world gets proved *ipso facto*. And, “There is no need to multiply examples”.⁶ This is one of the simplest proofs ever given for the externality of external world, although, philosophers all over the world have not been very happy with that owing to their dogmatic philosophical commitments. It is argued by many that Moore’s proof depends upon his seeing his hand, when he raises his hand, and what if, Moore is not seeing, but dreaming actually? What if Moore is just dreaming that he is seeing his hand which although is not there? In that case, the proof of Moore will tumble down. As Annalisa Coliva notes as follows:

... Moore’s proof can be reconstructed as follows:

1. Here’s one hand;
2. If there is one hand here, then the external world exists;
3. The external world exists.

.....the warrant Moore has for 1) is his visual experience. Now, that visual experience would be the same in case Moore were just dreaming of having a hand....⁷

In the light of such counter-arguments, Moore’s simple proof has been criticized bitterly in the philosophical quarters everywhere. But, this seems to be an exaggerated criticism, for I maintain that any proof of external world would be still wanting if we would just go on tearing it apart piecemeal. The criticism is an extreme one without paying due attention to what Moore attempts to say.

If we start doubting the very existence of our body, then the doubt of our existence would not make much sense. We can doubt certain elements of our belief system, but not system as a whole. As Wittgenstein says, “We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them all.” Wouldn’t it be more correct to say: “we do not doubt them all”....⁸

⁶ George Berkeley, *Dialogues* i:463

⁷ Annalisa Coliva, *Moore’s Proof of an External world. Just begging the question*

⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 30e Blackwell, 1975

Truth and falsity according to Wittgenstein is not a metaphysical exercise, but the concept of truth and falsity are admissible only in the context of language use. We do not verify and falsify all the components of our belief systems, but we refer to our world by the use of our language in such a way that our language represents them truly, and thus, make them true or false, existent or non-existent. The claim “here is a hand” is about the fact of the world and hence it may be subjected to doubt. But similar propositions can make sense when they have functions in language. That is, “Here is a hand” is an ostensive definition, which has a meaning in the context of its use and indicates how the word has been used in this particular context. Wittgenstein admits that this proposition can be doubted if it is taken as an empirical proposition, but one cannot thereby conclude that all propositions of this type can be doubted. And if we doubt all propositions of this sort then communication, action, life etc. are not possible at all. Thus, Wittgenstein does not give the status of first proposition to any one particular proposition, but to some set of propositions which can form the basis of the belief in other propositions. This view is quite close to what Moore tried to prove using the notion of common sense.

The best proof of external world is from common sense experience of it, and if that is held under doubt, it seems difficult to see, how further proves is possible. Dreaming is one thing which one neither can prove, nor disprove. You cannot say at any point of your dream that you are dreaming, or even that you are not dreaming! Dreaming is beyond the pale of doubt, or certainty in this sense. The question of truth and falsity therefore does not apply to dream, and consequently, the proof regarding it. Certainty and doubt is the matter of epistemology and language dynamics, it has nothing to do with dreams. World is to be taken for granted. It does not make any sense to ask proofs for it. It would be quite absurd to call our decades of life spent here a big philosophical dream. If taken as dream would imply our whole knowledge, accumulated over the millennia, just a figment of imagination. The question, then, by consequence, would also lose its relevance. Any question is relevant when asked outside dream. We never bother about what we question or answer while we dream. If the debate of proof of the external world has been going on since ages, it is because all this debate has not been going on in dreams. The very debate is the proof of external world.

External world is beyond the domain of skeptic's doubt. We can ask at best how this world functions, but not whether it functions at all. External world is the basic condition for all the further proofs. Without taking world in this sense, not one step we can take regarding anything. Even a proof regarding world, we can ask only while living in the world. The question itself gives us the guarantee that it exists, and it can be proved, if proof still is required. It can be done with having approaching it with common sense without all the dust of philosophical doubts gathered over the centuries.