

Present or Absent Agent: From Berkeley to Mamardashvili

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Abstract: I show that the observation of the objects of the observer-dependent world – that by virtue of which they are given – is not itself given as another object. The peculiarity of observation is that it is irreducible to either an object or an abstract concept. We see the content of the observation, but we do not see the observation itself, it is not an object or an object for us. Therefore, we can apply the category of “virtuality” to the observation itself, as well as to the observer.

1. The purpose of Bin Liu’s target article, “The World of Screen Creatures,” reflects very accurately the necessary changes that must be made in the science of consciousness in order to get out of an epistemological impasse, because no progress will be made otherwise. These changes are increasingly discussed in the literature. I refer to the global task of overcoming the dichotomy of “real” from “illusion” in perception, which is expected to help us take a fresh look at traditional epistemological issues.
2. According to Liu’s version, we have no means of distinguishing “real” from “illusion,” since for the observer, “illusion” feels as convincing as “reality.” This position has sound philosophical roots including Kant’s transcendental idealism and Berkeley’s subjective idealism. Berkeley’s philosophical logic will suffice to show the essence of this position. How can one assert that the object of a perception has nothing to do with the perception itself? Then what is the object except what I perceive it as? Of course, we can try to separate the perception from the perceived and say that the perceived exists by itself, somewhere in an observer-independent world, and perception either accurately conveys to us the image of this object “as it is” – either photographically, or by offering a certain version, an interpretation of that, which is “in itself.” In such reasoning, we try to “throw” the object over the edge of perception, but this is impossible to do, because as long as we are talking about a certain object such as “a table,” “a chair” or “a glass of water,” the object that is the product of my perception is meant. In order to reliably determine the existence of an object in a state outside of oneself, one would have to be able to go beyond the limits of one’s own perception, which is impossible. The result of this reasoning is the assertion of the phenomenal world – the world for the subject, besides which (for the subject) there is nothing.
3. The “reality” of the phenomenal world is not a fiction for the subject, because she cannot leave the phenomenal world in some arbitrary way, nor can she consider it as not

her own, and so on. The phenomenal world formed by the subject has all the signs of a reality. The only aspect of such a world that does not quite portray the phenomenal world is that it is impossible to speak of its existence either in the affirmative or in the negative sense, as soon as we eliminate the subject; we just do not know what the world would be like without the subject.

4. The idea of the indeterminacy of the world outside the activity of the subject is the most vivid illustration of the idea of the subject's ability to create worlds. What Liu intends to show is that we do not need to adhere to the concept of a "subject creator," but we can simply witness the equivalence of the worlds in which the subject creates a virtual world or is placed in a virtual world. This formulation of the problem has much in common with classic philosophical thought, in particular with that of Berkeley, already mentioned above. Berkeley did not dare to assert that the subject herself creates and maintains the reality in which she finds herself. Rather, these reins must be handed over to God. In this sense, Berkeley builds a rather curious version of subjectivism – every world is the world of some observer (subject), but the world we know is closed to us: we can neither influence it nor change it according to our subjective arbitrariness. This happens because the creator of this world is another observer, in this case God. It does not matter who it is – God, a gamer, a programmer or an alien. Berkeley's formulations can be treated as metaphors. Ultimately, it is important for him to emphasize the virtual origin of all things. "Reality" is always someone's perception.

5. Accordingly, the bearer of a certain experience can always be inside someone else's experience. The most curious question here is: will it be possible to "guess" that we are in someone else's perception? Can we somehow uncover this circumstance? Let me consider this aspect more carefully. To this end, I would like to draw on one of the Russian philosophers of the 20th century, Merab Mamardashvili, who did much to strengthen the concepts of subject and subjectivity. He offered quite successful illustrations of what the finality of subjective experience means, to which practically nothing can be opposed.

6. I will refer to one of Mamardashvili's illustrations in which he raises the question of whether it is possible to distinguish representation from "reality." He writes:

"Let us imagine that there is a flat surface on which one-dimensional beings live. They move along this plane and behave in such a way that the metric by which they measure their motion to some point X itself shrinks as they move. But since it shrinks and the beings themselves shrink, they will never reach that point. Replace the point here with the word 'reality' – would they then approach that reality? Obviously not. For it is clearly infinity."¹ (Mamardashvili 2000: 89, my translation)

¹ "Представим себе, что есть плоскость, на которой живут одноплоскостные существа. Они движутся по этой плоскости и ведут себя так, что мера, посредством которой они измеряют свое движение к некой точке X, сама сокращается по мере их движения. Но поскольку она сокращается и существа сами сокращаются, то они никогда этой точки не достигнут. Замените здесь точку словом 'реальность' – приблизятся ли они тогда к этой реальности? Очевидно, нет. Ведь это явная бесконечность."

This metaphor is constructed by Mamardashvili on the basis of the well-known idea described by physicist Henri Poincaré, which later became known as the “Poincaré sphere.” According to this idea, in the case of synchronization of changes in space and objects of this space, for example, the shrinking of both, it is impossible to notice the boundaries of this space, and advancing through it will be objectively infinite. Mamardashvili himself preferred to use the metaphor of “Poincaré’s creature”:

“In Poincaré’s creature, nothing of the content of what he sees on the flat surface says that the measure of the surface has changing (it is getting shrunk - added by me”² (Mamardashvili 2000: 95, my translation).

And further:

“From the content of experience, the idea of a distinction between the virtual and the real cannot emerge. Suppose a plane appears to be infinite, but in “reality” it is finite. Now I am not talking about what is “real” finite or infinite. I am asking: how it is even possible that the idea of virtual and real will occur?”³ (Mamardashvili 2000: 95, my translation)

Every observer is such a “Poincaré being.” We cannot derive the distinction between “virtuality” and “reality” from experience itself. If someone could look at the whole picture from the side, then she would see that the described surface is not at all infinite, but finite. An external observer will be able to see both the point towards which the creature is striving, and the creature itself, and that the measurements change along the way. For an outside observer, it is obvious that a being is one-dimensional and lives on a finite surface, although for the being it seems infinite. However, from no experience that this being itself is able to experience (the experience of movement and measurement), will the one-dimensional being itself be able to gain knowledge of its own position.

7. Elsewhere, Mamardashvili gives another example:

“Imagine dominoes, not ordinary dominoes, but ones with numbers written on both sides. And on one side (say, the side visible to us) there are some numbers, and on the other side, invisible to us, but visible to another being, which moves the dominoes, there are other numbers. The other being moves them according to the laws of arithmetic and in accordance with what is written on them. For example, on one domino it says ‘one,’ on another one ‘two,’ and the being wants to get three, so it adds them accordingly. However, on our side completely different numbers are moving. And in a completely different order and sequence – incomprehensible to us. Without seeing the obverse side of the dominoes, we cannot, in principle, see any comprehensible order in the movement of the numbers on our side.”⁴

² “У существа Пуанкаре ничто из содержания увиденного им на плоскости пространства не говорит о том, что у него изменяются меры измерения.”

³ “Из содержания опыта не может возникнуть идея различения между кажущимся и существующим на самом деле. Допустим, плоскость кажется бесконечной, а на самом деле она конечна. Сейчас я говорю не о том, что на самом деле конечно или бесконечно. Я спрашиваю: откуда вообще может появиться идея о кажущемся и существующем?”

⁴ «Представьте себе домино, но не обычное, а с цифрами, написанными на обеих сторонах фишек. Причем на одной (скажем, видимой нам стороне) – одни цифры, а на другой, невидимой нам стороне, но видимой другому существу, которое и двигает фишки домино, – другие цифры. Оно

(Mamardashvili 1992: 47, my translation)

This example is interesting precisely because it blurs the difference between the two worlds. The point is that in our “virtual” world, we also get patterns and they even seem to be consistent with what supposedly exists on the other side. However, according to observation, according to the analysis of our own experience, we are unlikely to find its boundaries. If we develop this theme, then we will have to admit that nothing at all is located outside one’s own private phenomenology. In general, this is not surprising if we admit that, in principle, there can be no “appearance” for the perceiving consciousness. One cannot look at the world when no one is looking at it. I cannot see the world as it is at the moment when I do not see it: this contradicts the very logic of the task. Indeed, it is not only the act of physical vision that matters – a world independent of my perception cannot even be assumed. Everything that we could assume is part of active perception, to which only some observer has access.

8. If we now return to Liu’s article, we will see that he insists on the virtualization not only of what is perceived, but also of the one who perceives. Here, of course, one of the most important objections will be the Cartesian “cogito” argument. According to this argument, the perceiver can never be an illusion. The perceived may turn out to be an illusion, but not the perceiver herself.

9. However, if we combine the main theses of Liu with what we can find in Mamardashvili, then we may be able to avoid the contradiction. The Cartesian argument – the perceiver must exist, in order to be able to doubt her perception – seems impossible to refute. However, if nothing in experience tells us whether the experience is “real” or “illusory,” then what will happen to the subject? With regard to the subject, we will have to say that it is never part of the experience, it is not in the experience itself. Indeed, in order for something to appear as an object and be this object itself, it must be in the state of being an object of observation. However, to take a meta-position in relation to oneself, i.e., turn oneself into an object, is not possible. We cannot include the very place from which we are observing in the observation picture, because then the place from which a certain perspective opens up is lost. The very disposition of observation is such that the place of observation is never part of it, is never included in the observation. The place of observation must be outside the observation, providing the observation itself.

10. In this sense, when Lin speaks about the virtuality of the subject of observation, I can agree with him. The subject of observation is virtual in the sense that she is not a part of the same experience in which everything else exists – the world, things, others. Observation does not become part of observation, despite our best efforts.

двигает их по законам арифметики и сообразно своим написаниям. Например, там написано на одной фишке – один, на другой – два, и оно хочет получить три и соответственно складывает их. Но на нашей стороне пришли в движение совсем другие цифры. И совсем в другом порядке и последовательности -для нас непостижимой. Не видя лицевой стороны фишек, мы в принципе не можем увидеть никакого уопостижаемого порядка движения цифр на нашей стороне.»

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