

Sartre on Berkeley

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In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre asks, “Why not... say that the being of an appearance is its appearing?”¹ He continues, “That is simply a way of clothing Berkeley's venerable phrase 'esse est percipi' in new words.”² Sartre then regrets to opine that, “Berkeley's famous formula seems unlikely to satisfy us.”³ Why is this the case? What will be the cause of this dissatisfaction? We learn that, “...essentially this is for two reasons: first, because of the nature of the *percipi* and second, because of the nature of the *percipere*.”⁴ By *percipi*, Sartre of course refers to the perceived, while by *percipere* he refers to the perceiving.

Sartre contends that, “If any metaphysics presupposes a theory of knowledge, it is equally true that any theory of knowledge presupposes a metaphysics.”⁵ This is a very interesting and perhaps contentious question, but how does it relate to Berkeley? Sartre continues, “This means... that any idealism aiming to reduce being to our knowledge of it must first account in some way for the being of the knowledge.”⁶ Perhaps true, but we would argue that Berkeley addresses this concern. For Berkeley, *notions* (which are individual pieces of knowledge) are *internally sensed*, or at least this is our interpretation of Berkeley. Sartre may be correct to point out that Berkeley needs to do this. But he is surely wrong if he means to suggest that Berkeley does not actually do it. We contend that for Berkeley, notions have both an ontological and an epistemological status. Their ontological status is or refers to what they *are*, while their epistemological

1 *Being and Nothingness*, Introduction, Section III. Page 8. Sarah Richmond translation, Routledge, 2018. *Italics* are Sartre's.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

status is or refers to what they *contain*. Thus, Berkeley fully satisfies the requirements that Sartre demands. He discusses in detail the “being of the knowledge”. Notions, or pieces of knowledge, are for Berkeley obtained by reason or reflexion [sic].

Sartre next suggests that if we posit knowledge as a given and at the same time claim that *esse est percipi*, “...the perception-perceived totality, deprived of any solid being to support it, will collapse into nothingness.”⁷ We suspect that this would be an accurate challenge to Hume, but not to Berkeley. There is no “nothingness” in Berkeley's immaterialism, though there may well be in Hume's phenomenalism. For Berkeley posits a God of *pure activity* as demonstrable through a proper use of reason and reflexion. God is for Berkeley a principle of motion and change of ideas, one active substance. And we *can* have a notion, or knowledge of Him.

Sartre also writes, “Thus the being of knowledge cannot be measured by knowledge; it escapes the '*percipi*'.”⁸ This is equivalent to absolute skepticism, and the thinking of Hume, but it applies not to Berkeley. Sartre argues further, “Thus the foundation-being of the *percipere* and of the *percipi* must itself escape the *percipi*: it must be transphenomenal.”⁹ This is a pronouncement that Berkeley will entirely agree with. There *is* for Berkeley a transphenomenal being- a soul, a self, a principle of motion and change of ideas. There *are* substances, whether finite or infinite. And we *can* have notions of these, though insofar as they are transphenomenal we cannot strictly speaking have ideas of them.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.* Page 8/9.