

‘To Exist is Either to Perceive or Be Perceived’ – How would you explain Bishop Berkeley’s idealism to someone who knew nothing about philosophy?

“Sorry son, you asked me what I am reading? I am studying Berkeley’s theories on idealism.”

“What did I just say you ask? Sorry son, sometimes I forget you are only eight years old, let me see if I can explain it a little better. This Berkeley fellow claimed that “to be is to be perceived”. What he meant by this is that if something exists, like your toy robot here, it is because you can see it, feel it, and hear it make noises. However your robot exists only as an idea, you think it is there but it doesn’t really exist except in your mind. If you can’t see it, or feel it, or hear it then it simply doesn’t exist. In fact, he believed the only things in the world that do exist are minds, ideas, and God.”

“You wonder why if your robot is big and heavy how it can’t exist? Well when you look at your robot you think it is big and when you lift it you think that is heavy but these are just ideas in your head.”

“No you are not crazy son, let me give you a better example. Do you see that star up there, it looks as small as the end of a pencil. Well it’s actually large enough to fit hundreds of our planet inside of it. To us it appears small because that is just how we see it. Your robot feels heavy because that’s just how you feel it. I, on the other hand, think it is very light. So which is it heavy or light? Well the answer is “it depends”, it depends on who is lifting it. The same goes for how big it is. You are young and so to you your robot is large, but to me it is very small because I am much bigger than you are. So its size is not some feature of your robot. Its size, like how heavy it is, depends on who is looking at it, or holding it, and is just an idea in your mind.”

“You wonder if how heavy it is, and how large it is depends on the person looking at it and lifting it, then what happens when nobody is looking at it or lifting it? You ask a very important question son. Berkeley in my book here says it no longer exists because for your robot to exist someone has to see, touch, hear, or smell it. To put it simply, you know your robot is there because you can see, hear, and feel it. And just like the stars in the sky, things that you can see, hear, and feel are ideas in our head. That would mean that your robot is just an idea in your head.”

“You mean if nobody was looking or listening to me would I disappear? No because remember Berkeley claims that only ideas, minds, and God exists. Like you, I have a mind, so I exist and would not disappear. Now your robot, it doesn’t have a mind like you do but that still doesn’t mean it disappears when you go outside to play. Berkeley believed that your robot wouldn’t disappear because God is always aware that it is there so it remains there. We usually believe we are aware of objects and that they are independent of us, existing outside of our minds. However, Berkeley believed that God created a world where our experiences are the physical world not the physical world producing experiences in us. In this world God perceives everything and we are just sharing in God’s perceptions so nothing would really disappear.”

“So what do I believe? I agree we cannot prove Berkeley wrong but I still can’t agree with him for one main reason. Let’s pretend for a moment that what Berkeley says is true. Everything you perceive is only ideas in your mind. You told me that last night you dreamed that we went fishing and you caught three large mouth bass. If everything you perceive is only an idea in your mind, how could you be sure that you weren’t really there fishing and it is our discussion right now that is your dream? You can’t even be certain that you aren’t hallucinating right now while sitting in that boat fishing. I cannot accept what Berkeley believes because I cannot accept that my idea of you right now could also be a hallucination or a dream and that I cannot know for sure. In order to live my life I need to believe that you are real and not a mere hallucination or dream. Son, I cannot tell you if Berkeley is right in what he believes, but what I do know is that if Berkeley is ever proven correct I hope nobody ever tells me so.”

References

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