

Question on Perfume of Silence re Idealism

JB: I would to check my understanding of something you've written in The Perfume of Silence. I co-host the webinars with Bill Free and he likes me to explain things so I want to be absolutely clear about what I say about what you've written. Could I just read a bit, and then explain my understanding of it, and then you can tell me if that's correct?:

The Perfume of Silence p 17-18

"What is meant by saying the world does not exist if I am not looking at it?"

We have to be careful when we say, "The world does not exist if I am not looking at it." "I" in this case refers to consciousness, so in effect the statement could be reformulated, "The world does not exist if it is not appearing in consciousness." This doesn't imply that the world does not exist if it is not appearing in this specific mind. There is a big difference. For instance, London may not be appearing to you right now, but I am sure that it is appearing to a few people. Therefore, to say that London doesn't exist because it is not appearing to this specific mind, is not what is implied by the statement, "If London is not appearing it does not exist."

Any object is simply its appearance in consciousness. This understanding frees us from the notion of a world existing "out there," separate and independent from consciousness. It doesn't imply that the content of the mind is all that exists. It means that all that exists is in consciousness."

JB: So my understanding of this is that it doesn't even matter if there are no minds of any kind perceiving London – whether it's human minds or rat minds or spider minds, or anything – it could still exist. In other words, there doesn't need to be any kind of agency or instrument of perception for the planets and the stars to exist, or have some form of existence. They could exist and come and go, without there being any sentient beings in the universe, because consciousness is the ultimate perceiver.

So is that right?

FL: Yes.

Everything we know, is either through the mind, or consciousness itself, from our human observation position. So we don't know whether there are other forms of existence than mind-stuff. But we cannot exclude this possibility. So that's why I was listening to the reading of the book and in the beginning you were saying that things that are not perceived in consciousness – that's what I say in the book – that's not completely my understanding. My understanding is that nothing exists independently from consciousness. Because then when we say 'perceived in consciousness', we tend usually to superimpose onto the word 'perceived', the modality of human mind perception.

So it's not incorrect to say – because if we see the act of consciousness ... if we call it perceiving .. as it consciousnesses through a human apparatus, a human instrument, then this consciousnessing or perceiving takes the shape of human phenomenal perception. But there can be other forms of perception that have very little to do with our own ordinary human perception in the form of thoughts, bodily sensations and external sense perceptions. So that's why I prefer to say 'nothing exists independently from consciousness'. Consciousness is the substance of all things, whether or not perceived by sentient being agencies.

JB: So that includes alien sentient beings – which might exist – as well as human sentient beings?

FL: Other realms, yes. One example I often use is the realm of mathematical ideas – it's connected to Platonic forms, Plato's 'intellect'. Mathematical ideas such as the number π , they have a fixed value, they don't evolve in time, and they are independent of whoever conceives them. So they have a form of existence that is independent from any specific human mind, in the same way that a tree or a mountain out there in the world has some form of existence that is independent from each human mind through which awareness perceives it. And, in this world of mathematical ideas, there are distinctions. The number π and the number 1 are not the same number. So there are differences. However, what is interesting is that there is no 'time' dimension in it, so there is no evolution. So it's a kind of 'space' which is very different from our usual space-time of the physical world. So we have to be open to the possibility of other realms to which the human mind has no access, that's all. We cannot 'limit God', if you will. We have to allow God to be infinite in all possible meanings of the word.

Also there is another argument which is often made, that there is no need to posit a world out there, or the realm of mathematical ideas out there, that doesn't exist while human minds don't perceive it because we have to limit ourselves to our own experience. And a minimalist approach using Occam's razor demands that we eliminate any superfluous hypothesis. So that would lead, *apparently*, to a perspective, in which nothing exists – not only independently from awareness, but moreover nothing exists independently from minds similar to our human mind.

The problem with this is that if we claim that to posit something which is not directly perceived is superfluous, since we don't perceive other minds – from one human mind we don't have access to other minds – application of the same rule would lead us to a purely solipsistic position, in which we deny the existence of other minds. And in that case, I've no business talking with you since you don't really exist. So we encounter some difficulties with this hypothesis which relate to the experience of love, the experience of communication. So that's why it's better to be more generous with God, instead of limiting God to something which is like human minds. You know the words of Voltaire: someone in his presence was saying 'God created man in his image', and Voltaire quipped 'and conversely'!

So the idealist view according to which the world exists only in minds, like Bishop Berkeley's view, is very, very limiting. The view that the world exists only in consciousness, consciousness being seen as the ultimate reality of everything – that doesn't pose any problem.

So Jenny, if you read this part of the book, be careful about what it means when it says that things don't exist unless they are perceived by consciousness. The word 'perceived' has to be corrected here because it's too ambiguous. Because 'perceived by consciousness' doesn't really mean a mind-like form of perceiving. It's better to say that the world doesn't exist independently from consciousness.

JB: Yes, I'll do that. That's really why I asked you this question.