

“Man is the measure of all things”.

Plato. *The Theaetetus and Philebus of Plato. Sophist*. Translated by H. F. Carill. Edinburgh: The Riverside Press Limited, 109, p.25.

## The unreality of things

If a tree falls in a forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? This old brainteaser relates to a topic of great philosophical interest – the relationship between the subject and its surroundings. We often regard the world as a material and objective entity, and our observation of it as passive, but it could be that the relationship is more symbiotic. Maybe observation is a productive action, producing what is being observed. This alternative worldview prompts the question of how dependent the world really is on the consciousness of the one perceiving it? Is it true that, like Plato said, “man is the measure of all things”, and what implications does that have for the rest of the world? In exploring this question, I will be looking at different metaphysical and epistemological viewpoints relating to the subject-object relationship.

Plato’s view parallels the biblical one, which places man in the centre of the universe, as the one created in God’s image to be the steward of His creation. They differ, however, in that the biblical view doesn’t question the reality of the extra-conscious world, only places it beneath the observing consciousness. In the bible, the world existed before mankind, and so could exist without it as well. One can read in Plato’s statement a more solipsistic argument than this – man being the measure of all things would mean that the existence of all things is dependent on man in some way, as nothing could exist without being measured. Without humans there to measure, quantify, and define the world, an apple would be nothing more than a collection of atoms, no different than the atoms of its surroundings. It is we who group these atoms together, deciding which go with each other and which are excluded, and then define this group as an ‘apple’. In the biblical view it is God who takes this role as creator-definer, and humans are themselves also created and defined by Him, and then placed in this world. Not as the measure of all things, but as caretaker, or subjugator, of them.

According to a scientific view, the tree would of course make a sound – sound being composed of air in motion, and thus an objective quantity, not just a subjective experience. We often think of science as objectifying the world, only concerning itself with what it deems objective. But the scientific viewpoint is also primed for the idea of observation being an active and productive activity, not just the passive observation of what is already there. Especially when working in the quantum world, scientists must acknowledge carefully the way their observation of phenomena changes these phenomena. Particles behave differently when watched; a cat in a box with a time bomb is paradoxically both dead and alive right up until the box is opened, and the cat is observed. If scientific truth is to be counted as *the* Truth, then yes, a symbiotic relationship does exist between subject and

object, and we are the measure of things – both in the way we are the ones who measure and describe the things, but also in the way the things react and change in the moment we observe them. So, while science would probably not go as far as total solipsism, it does affirm elements of the idea Plato describes.

In Immanuel Kant's synthesis of empiricism and rationalism, the concept of an objective outside world is central. In order for us to obtain knowledge, we are, according to Kant, dependent on both our ability to sense and observe the world, as well as our rational ability to analyse and categorise it. The information we get from our senses, however, does not arrive in our mind in a neutral, unfiltered state. There is certain a priori knowledge that facilitates the observation, meaning that the information is immediately interpreted and categorised according to prior knowledge and assumptions. This creates a distinction between what Kant calls *das Ding an sich* (the thing in itself) and *das Ding für mich* (the thing to me); between the objective reality of the world and how the world appears to the conscious subject. Implicit here is of course the existence of *das Ding an sich* – an objective reality existing outside of and independent to observation. However, this reality is inaccessible to us, and we therefore cannot know for certain anything about it, putting us right back at square one: if we cannot know objective truths about the world *an sich*, how do we know it exists at all?

Thus, we cannot know the reality of anything outside of our consciousness – we are in that way imprisoned in our rationality, which warps and interprets, without our meaning to, anything it observes. Assuming that I am not the sole conscious being, a collective world *für mich*, the world we conscious beings observe/create and together live in and relate to, must exist. This world is the amalgamation, the synthesis, of each individual world *für mich*. In it, man therefore *must be* the measure of all things, as the world itself is a construction, at least in part, of mankind. The conscious mind is here a precondition for all other things – the observer comes first, and in observation creates what is observed. Whether or not we are the measure of things in the objective reality, the one hidden in plain sight, if such a thing exists, is impossible to know. So, *in the world I exist in* – the subjective world within a world – the cat is both dead and alive and a tree makes no sound unless someone hears it.

All this assumes the uniqueness of the human mind, which is deemed unique because of not only our consciousness, but also our meta-consciousness, our ability to critically reflect on our existence as conscious beings. We assume that this is what separates us from other animals, who have consciousness but do not reflect on their having it. This is a major assumption, typical of humanity's chauvinistic tendency to look down on other forms of consciousness. Man is the measure of all things – all things are subservient to our superior intellect. I am guilty of this too – it seems difficult to believe that other animals can think in abstracts. They at least aren't doing anything with the ability, as we are the only beings who produce. Perhaps, then, meta-consciousness isn't the main essence of

humankind, but rather our creative and productive quality. If we do shift our definition of man from being concerned with our consciousness to our actions, our material effect on the world, then we are no longer the measure of all things, although we are the creators of a great deal.