

The Basis of Reality

What is Yours?

By

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When a child awakens from a nightmare, we provide comfort with reassurances that “it was only a dream.” This common condolence suggests that most of us believe we can distinguish the difference between what is and isn’t real, which seems so evident that we presume even young children can grasp it. We may not realize we are dreaming when we’re dreaming, but we know we’re not dreaming when we’re awake. Even so, if I ask how you know you’re awake and not dreaming right now, it might be hard to explain in a convincing way. If we don’t know we’re dreaming when we’re dreaming, how can any of us ever be sure we’re not dreaming?

I’d say it’s because there are major differences between these two states that are palpable when we’re awake. Unlike dreams, being awake is a richer, fuller, more continuous experience that’s bound by the laws of physics. We dream of all sorts of fantastic powers, artifacts, and places, but upon awaking we find a familiar world bound by consistent phenomenological constraints. We dream only a few minutes during REM sleep, which lasts an average of 1.5 to 2 hours per night, compared to being awake about two-thirds of our day. We mostly don’t remember our dreams yet retain much about our waking life from day to day and keep many of those memories throughout our lives. So it’s not difficult to discern the differences between dreaming and waking once we’re awake, and it’s no wonder that even a child, who intuitively recognizes the contiguous and consistent nature of the waking world, can be genuinely comforted by hearing, “It was only a dream.”

So, we may know the difference between dreaming and awake, but the real question is what does it mean to be awake? How do we know being awake isn’t just another kind of dreaming, just a notch up from REM sleep? Consciousness is a relative term since we are conscious of little: since we are mostly unconscious even when we are awake. Dreaming occurs only when we’re close to waking and can itself be described as a relative state of consciousness, which is why we remain conscious of some of our dreams. And when we are awake and aware that we aren’t dreaming, we remain relatively conscious of only an infinitesimally small bit of reality. Our consciousness is mostly limited to our current surroundings, preoccupations, immediate perceptions, and incomplete beliefs about the world.

If I ask if there are any birds on the roof just a few feet above you, or a fly on the wall right behind you, or a dust bunny under the cushion beneath you, you are unlikely to know (although you could probably make a reasonable guess about the dust bunny). The point is, even when we’re in what we consider our waking state, we’re not very conscious of what’s right around us, let alone of the world far away. Ours is a relative, isolated, locative state of

wakefulness, much closer to the dream-state than not when considering all there is to know and how little of it we do know. We are far more unconscious than conscious even when we're awake. So what does it mean to be awake and, when it comes to our grasp on reality, how much better is it than just dreaming?

The branch of philosophy seeking to understand the underlying nature of reality is called *metaphysics*. It's not only philosophy's first perennial problem, the question Western philosophy was born asking, but is also the question for which philosophers are often caricatured as bumbling, out-of-touch, and useless for most anything but a few good laughs. After all, even young children know the difference between dreaming and being *woke*, to use one of today's arrogant and presumptive terms. Despite these mischaracterizations, philosophers prefer them to becoming subsumed within the matrix of common-sense thinking, of being assimilated into the collective and unable to think for ourselves. I certainly have no desire to be part of those who arrogantly presume they have cornered the market on *wokeness* today: that they alone know what it means to be *woke* and can easily and quickly judge who is and isn't *woke*. When it comes to wokeness, count me out. I am neither *woke* nor still waking and can assure you my resistance is not futile.

Remember the allegory of Plato's cave, about a group of prisoners who have been raised in a cave facing a wall upon which they only see shadows? It's the only reality they've ever known so they are certain this dark world of mere shadows is the only reality there is. When an individual manages to escape into the bigger and brighter world outside their cloistered reality, then returns to lead them to these wonders, they take him for a blindman because he stumbles about, his eyes not having readjusted to the darkness. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates tells this story to Glaucon, a name that fittingly means "gray eyed" and shares the same root as *glaucoma*. Socrates tells Glaucon, "Men would say of him that up he went and down he came without his eyes; and that it was better not even to think of ascending; and if any one tried to loose another and lead him up to the light, let them only catch the offender, and they would put him to death."¹ Seeing and perceiving things differently than most has, indeed, gotten lots of truly enlightened people killed throughout human history, or otherwise punished and ostracized. No wonder so few are courageous enough to leave the matrix, or to resist the collective. But remaining in a dark cave is not being *woke*: It is Endarkenment, not Enlightenment. Thinking our limited perspective is all there is to it, is folly.

Yet, for tens of thousands of years, human beings understood and explained reality in dreamlike terms that they thoroughly believed. These phantasms, that today we consider only myths, often became the basis of religious beliefs that were clung to and enforced upon others with religious certitude and fervor. Some of them still are. Whether the belief that the Babylonian god Marduk created the world out of the remains of Tiamat's body after slaying the monstrous chaos goddess with his explosive arrow; or that Gaia and Uranus (Earth and Sky) gave birth to the Greek's twelve Titans, including Cronus (Time) and Rhea (the Great Mother), who themselves gave birth to the Olympians who ruled the elements and the

seasons, including Apollo who daily pulls the Sun across the sky with his chariot; to the Hebrew's Yahweh using voice commands to create the world in just six days, then walking about in a garden with the world's first two humans; to the literal belief in the physical resurrection of an ancient martyr, humans have long taken stories no less impossible than the stuff of our dreams for reality itself, and, in many cases, still do, which is why it's important to consider our own basis of reality, our own reasons for claiming we know what's real.

Western philosophy began asking this question 2,600 years ago, beginning with the first philosopher, Thales of Miletus. Thales, like the escapee in Plato's allegory, was often scoffed and laughed at because his obsession with figuring out the nature of reality was considered a useless waste of time by others. But Thales, and those philosophers immediately following him, were the first in recorded history who attempted to explain reality in natural rather than supernatural terms. They are usually referred to as the Presocratics but, to me, this term diminishes their own significance by making them sound secondary to that of Socrates, as if philosophy had been waiting for Socrates to come around. Socrates certainly spun philosophy in new and important directions, but those who came before him took humanity a mental leap forward as significant as Neil Armstrong's first step upon the Moon.

So I'm more inclined to call Thales the founder of Western civilization than the first in a short line of Presocratics. What he, and Anaximander, and Anaximenes, and Pythagoras, and Democritus, and the other first philosophers gave us should be considered among the most pivotal bifurcation points in human development. By seeking to explain our existence in natural rather than supernatural terms the first philosophers simultaneously invented science, which is why Aristotle, a post-Socratic philosopher, refers to many of them in his *Physics* Book I, in which he calls them *phusikoi*—physicists—rather than *Presocratics*. "Philosophy and science begin with Thales of Miletus in the early sixth century B.C.,"² Bertrand Russell says. "The rise of Greek civilization which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since."³

As a result, we now distinguish between dreams as "only dreams" because there is something of a *phusikoi* in all of us. That is, we think of reality in materialistic ways, even if we don't understand much about science or think of ourselves as materialists. A strict adherence to this metaphysic is called *Empiricism*, which, oddly, comes from the Skeptic philosophers who believed our perceptions of reality can always be questioned. The Skeptics, however, were far from hopeless. They realized, rather, that we seek truth in order to find peace of mind (*ataraxia*), sometimes causing us to be dogmatic about our beliefs (thinking we have discovered absolute truth), sometimes causing us to insist truth can never be found, (which is also a dogmatic position), and sometimes, as they preferred, by continuing the search for answers while suspending judgment, which keeps us from becoming dogmatic about anything.

Skepticism was founded by Pyrrho in the 4th century BCE, who traveled from Greece to India during his life and was influenced by Hinduism's idea that nothing exists, that everything is an illusion, "that," as Diogenes of Laertius wrote, "nothing is either just or unjust, nothing is honorable or dishonorable, indeed that nothing really exists; and only custom and habit guide human affairs. Neither our experience nor our beliefs (our *doxai*) are true or false; there is no logical difference between them, and therefore they are undecidable."⁴ Rather than becoming nihilistic, however, Pyrrho, Diogenes goes on to say, "was supremely relaxed and calm; he was indifferent to events—he did not even try to get out of the way of oncoming traffic and had constantly to be rescued by his friends from being knocked down."⁵ It's said he even once passed a drowning man without helping, since he believed saving or not saving him would have made no difference.

I'm pretty sure I would trade peace of mind for some anxiety if being anxious is necessary for me to care for my own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. But such skepticism foreshadows the postmodern mindset many hold today, insisting objective truth is unobtainable, that truth is subjective, one person's truth is as good as any others, and that science and facts are misleading and false. So it's interesting that *Empiricism* was named after Pyrrho's skeptical successor, Sextus Empiricus, who reasoned, since it's necessary to counter Dogmatism by always suspending judgement, that we should focus on what's right in front of us, on what's observable. Hence, *Empiricism* has come to mean exactly that, focusing on observable facts and proven experience even if we don't know what ultimate reality is, a philosophy that led to modern medicine. So remaining skeptical about what we know and what others claim to know can have pragmatic consequences, even if it is noncommittal.

I won't bore you with a litany of all that various philosophers have said about the underlying nature of reality. For our purposes, it's enough to understand they essentially fall into two camps, which we have already been dealing with: the view that reality is physical and can be understood by determining the laws of physics, and the view that reality is nonphysical, more akin to a dream, and that our sensual perceptions of the world are misleading. Plato's *idealism*, which posited the world we perceive is only an imperfect simulation of an ideal realm we cannot perceive; the Neoplatonists who later influenced Christianity with their belief that mind is more fundamental than matter; and Descartes who still later argued the only thing any of us can be sure of is the existence of our own minds (*Cogito ergo sum*) and that knowledge can be obtained through reason alone, without empirical evidence, are examples of nonphysical metaphysics. Democritus, who was among the first philosophers, and his belief that reality is composed of uncuttable, indivisible, unchanging atoms; Karl Marx's *dialectical materialism* positing reality is purely physical and that history emerges due to the conflict of material forces, that, as he said, "Matter, nature, being, the physical—is primary, and spirit, consciousness, sensation, the psychical—is secondary,"⁶ are examples of materialistic metaphysics.

Today this perennial metaphysical question, known as the mind/body problem, remains unanswered, if not unanswerable. The problem, in brief is one of interaction: if mind and body—thought and matter—are truly different, then they cannot influence each other, so there must be either one or the other. But which one? Either reality is composed of consciousness that is dreaming a physical illusion, or the world and everything in it are physical, including our thoughts that must be generated by neurochemical processes in the physical organ we call a brain.

Although I personally lean toward a materialistic and empirical view of reality, my point is not to solve the mind/body problem, but to point out it is a perennial problem that has not been satisfactorily solved. Still, many of us go about our lives as if we know precisely what reality is—so sure that we are ready to fight and hate over what we believe in, like the prisoners in Plato’s cave who would kill anyone who tries to lead them or anyone away from their small world. Those on the consciousness side of things, convinced they have become spiritually enlightened, easily become anti-intellectual and dismissive, if not hostile, toward reason and rational explanations. Those on the materialist side can become snobbish and equally as dismissive before the many mysteries that remain unexplained by science and reason.

So even if we should remain skeptical of skepticism, lest we end up like pitiful Prryho who doesn’t even try to distinguish fact from fiction, it might be wise to at least adopt the skeptical practice of suspending judgement about the true nature of reality while basing our decisions on what is observable and has been proven reliable over time. This way we remain open to changing our minds as we continue to ponder this perennial problem, as well as open to those of a different mind in the process.

That’s why asking this philosophical question is so important to leading a good life, not for the purpose of actually discovering the true nature of reality, although that would be nice, but for the joy of learning to live at ease with uncertainty and experiencing the endless wonder and curiosity of life, while also helping to fashion a society in which it’s okay not knowing, okay not going along with the crowd, okay if others disagree with us. Philosopher James Carse says, “Knowing that we don’t know is not only a higher ignorance, it is the basis for all our hope.”⁷ Philosophy is especially important today, in a society that is becoming increasingly divided by extremism and extremists who are so certain of their unexamined ideas, of their self-righteousness and *wokeness* that they are ready stuff their square pegs into round holes no matter what damage is done, or to whom. As Russell wrote, “People’s opinions are mainly designed to make them feel comfortable; truth, for most people is a secondary consideration.”⁸ Philosophy requires us to ask and keep asking the big questions, the basis of our notions of ethics, truth, meaning, happiness, and reality itself, and to remain humble in our responses. The basis of reality: What is yours? I don’t expect you to know the answer, but I do hope you will ask the question.

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¹ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII

² Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Grayling, A. C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 120.

⁵ Ibid., p. 120f.

⁶ Lennon, *Selected Works*, Eng., ed., Vol. XI, p. 208.

⁷ Carse, James, P., *Breakfast at the Victory*, (Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1994) p. 185.

⁸ Russell, Bertrand, *The Art of Philosophizing*, Philosophical Library, New York, NY, 1968, p. 2.