

# On Reality

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## Abstract

One may wonder whether reality itself is real or is just an illusion. This paper examines the various concepts of reality which is nevertheless an important mental construct.

**Keywords:** Physical senses; consciousness; existence; truth; fixed pattern; similar view; abstraction.

## 1 Introduction

As conscious, intelligent beings, we may question reality - whether something is real, imaginary or just hypothetical. Reality is intangible, abstract and we may wonder what it really is. How do we know or prove that something is real and not imaginary, hypothetical or just a dream? Here we attempt to grapple with some of these issues.

## 2 Interpretations of Reality

### Definition of Reality by Wikipedia:

Reality is the sum or aggregate of all that is real or existent, as opposed to that which is merely imaginary. The term is also used to refer to the ontological status of things, indicating their existence. In physical terms, reality is the totality of the universe, known and unknown. Philosophical questions about the nature of reality or existence or being are considered under the rubric of ontology, which is a major branch of metaphysics in the Western philosophical tradition. Ontological questions also feature in diverse branches of philosophy, including the philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophical logic. These include questions about whether only physical objects are real (i.e., Physicalism), whether reality is fundamentally immaterial (e.g., Idealism), whether hypothetical unobservable entities posited by scientific theories exist, whether God exists, whether numbers and other abstract objects exist, and whether possible worlds exist.

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### Definitions by Oxford Dictionaries:

- (i) The state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.
- (ii) A thing that is actually experienced or seen, especially when this is unpleasant.
- (iii) A thing that exists in fact, having previously only existed in one's mind.
- (iv) The quality of being lifelike.
- (v) The state or quality of having existence or substance.
- (vi) Existence that is absolute, self-sufficient, or objective, and not subject to human decisions or conventions.

Those things that could be detected by the physical senses such as sight, smell, taste, touch, hearing could be regarded as real. For example, green is green as seen by the eyes and no one would dispute with one over this (unless of course if the person is colour blind which is a rare personal defect that is found in some people). The same applies to good smell or bad smell, tastiness or rotten taste, hardness or softness, loudness or softness, etc., in general.

Many have wondered: Is mathematics, which is an exact science, real or invented? In mathematics only the counting numbers appear real, e.g., 1 car, 10 persons, 100 flags, etc., which could be counted/measured, and geometrical shapes which could be seen/measured with the eyes such as roundness, squareness, length, width, etc., which no one would dispute over. The problem appears to be with abstract "objects" which could not be detected/measured/counted by the above-mentioned physical senses such as beauty (e.g., in a beauty contest some may think that the beauty queen is not a deserving winner and the second runner up should be the beauty queen, etc.), ugliness, intelligence, stupidity, good, evil, rightness, wrongness, logic, illogic, kindness, selfishness, etc., which are subject to subjective interpretation and also subject to disputes. Similarly many areas in mathematics which are very abstract and do not directly involve the above-mentioned physical senses also depend on subjective interpretation and are subject to disputes, e.g., the proof of a statement whose logical consistency is a matter of subjective interpretation with nothing to do at all with the above-mentioned physical senses. In mathematics, a statement which is obvious and needs not to have a proof is called an axiom. Other mathematical statements which are not obvious need to have proofs to ascertain their validity. The interesting question here is what is obvious to one person might not be obvious to another person depending on their levels of intelligence; similarly the obviousness of the logical consistency of a mathematical statement or its proof to one person might not be so to another person. A simple example here:  $6 + 6 = 12$  might be obvious to a person of normal intelligence but might not be so to a person whose intelligence is at the idiot level.

This point may be considered: whether reality itself is real? Reality is a term used to denote that something exists. To a conscious, intelligent being like us something that exists is evidently something we are **conscious of** through our physical senses: what we see, hear, feel tactilely, taste, smell. Though we cannot see, hear, feel, taste, smell reality, reality is associated with the objects we could see, hear, feel, taste, smell, i.e., the objects we could see, hear, feel, taste, smell

are real to us, and, something we could not see, hear, feel, taste, smell are not real to us (which could perhaps be called imaginary objects).

Paradoxically, something not real could also be considered real, i.e., the non-existence of an object could be considered a reality, in other words, it could be a **fact** that an object does not exist. That is, something could be **really** unreal.

Real objects which we could see, hear, feel, taste, smell are tangible objects, which are grammatically known as nouns. Objects we could not see, hear, feel, taste, smell could be regarded as intangible objects, which are grammatically known as abstract nouns, e.g., reality, non-reality, beauty, ugliness, intelligence, foolishness, honesty, dishonesty, etc.

Reality, which we cannot see, hear, feel, taste, smell, is evidently a **creation** (or concept) of the **conscious** mind. We **created** the term “real” to describe something we could see, hear, feel, taste, smell - something that exists. Paradoxically, the non-existence or non-reality of an object (an object which we do not see, hear, feel, taste, smell and therefore non-existent or non-real to us) could also be regarded as real, i.e., the non-existence or non-reality of the object is a fact or a truth.

Perhaps, broadly speaking, reality could be regarded as anything the mind is **conscious of** - sight, noise, feel, taste, smell, reality, non-reality, truth, falsehood, sense, nonsense, beauty, ugliness, existence, non-existence, life, death, tangibility, intangibility, visibility, invisibility, fullness, emptiness, consciousness, unconsciousness, intelligence, foolishness, happiness, sadness, anger, humour, imagination, dream, spirituality, nothingness, loneliness, weirdness, etc. **Reality** could thus perhaps be regarded simply as **consciousness**. By this definition, even if the world is devoid of consciousness as would be the case if the world is suddenly without conscious beings, this non-existence or non-reality of reality could still be regarded as a reality by some possibly existent other-worldly, perhaps godly, conscious being who is **conscious** of this non-existence or non-reality of reality, i.e., this non-existence or non-reality of reality is real to this conscious being.

The above is one way of interpreting reality. There could be other ways of interpreting reality, e.g., someone might argue that reality is just an invention of the human mind and if the mind (maybe the mind of an animal, for example) could not conceive reality or think of it it would not exist.

Reality may in reality be just a creation, invention or concept of the intelligent human mind. It is indeed doubtful if reality exists in the non-human mind, e.g., the mind of an animal such as a dog, cat or horse.

### **3 What More of Reality?**

Reality is existence, fact, truth. As intelligent beings, we are always concerned with reality or the truth and abhor lies, fakeness, falsity. But we are also not averse to using falsity and lies to deceive others in order to achieve our objectives. Who has never lied before? As the

interpretation of reality has a tendency to be subjective it is often difficult to differentiate between the real, the truth, and the unreal, the false. Here we probe further into reality.

One view is that reality itself is not static and is changing with time. What is reality now may be a different reality in future. The future reality depends on the present reality. We cannot be sure of reality.

Reality may be a fixed pattern waiting to be discovered, e.g., in the case of scientific research. However, the problem with science is that what is seen and considered real depends on how the scientist interprets what is seen. Some may think that nature is not really a fixed pattern. So is this fixed pattern of nature indeed real or not?

We intelligent beings, especially scientists, attempt to see "order" or pattern where there is disorder, chaos or lack of order. When there is order or pattern in natural phenomena scientists are able to understand, explain them or predict them through reasoning or "cause and effect". When there is disorder, chaos, lack of pattern in natural phenomena they are unable to reason thus or predict the outcome - they will apparently then try to look out for some order or pattern in this disorder or chaos and on seeing some order, pattern or predictability will feel some sense of control, understanding and relief. It might be a case of scientists "seeing" what they (at least subconsciously) wanted to see. In other words, scientific work might be a case of make-belief. This apparently explains why scientific theories are revised or even discarded from time to time with "new evidences" whose reality might be doubtful.

It should be best for the scientific to keep an open, objective mind about scientific theories whether these scientific theories are created by themselves or others and be prepared to revise or discard them when the reason against them are evident. Nothing should be cast in stone. Our intelligent mind is apparently far from perfect when even the apparently most highly intelligent could not agree among themselves on what should be the facts or truths. Reality, fact or truth could be just a case of subjective interpretation.

What students learn from the science textbooks have to be taken for granted to be the truth, for even if they doubt or know that the textbooks are wrong they wouldn't be able to pass exams if they did not present these "wrong truths" in the exams. For every one of us, the practical problem could be that if we keep doubting the "scientific truths" and frequently dispute them nothing much productive could be achieved. So everyone just go along with the "truths" until they are strongly proven otherwise. This appears to be the problem of reality, fact or truth.

In science, the peer review or consensus among peers confirms the validity of a scientific truth. Here it is assumed that these peers are highly intelligent and know what they are talking about. Who are best in the position to judge the intellect, competence, objectivity and passion for truths of these peers who determine what the scientific "truths" are? It appears that everyone takes for granted that these scientists are highly intelligent, competent and have a passion for the truth. It appears that in an important way it is the scientists who determine or confirm reality for society as a whole.

Could reality be regarded as the way the physical senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch interpret the surrounding or environment?

On a more fundamental level, since the physical senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch are felt by the brain or consciousness, could reality be regarded as the way consciousness or intelligence interprets the environment, the interpretation varying from person to person depending on their levels of intelligence and even their varying cultures, which implies that

when consciousness does not exist, e.g., when the person is dead, reality would not exist (at least to the unconscious/dead person)?

Can we say that reality is an abstract entity used to describe existence, fact or truth which we experience with the physical senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch, and become aware of with our conscious mind, with the experience more or less similar among all conscious, intelligent beings - reality requiring a certain level of intelligence to comprehend while beings of lower intelligence such as animals may not know or be aware of reality? Thus, can we say that reality may not be real (as it is not directly experienced by the physical senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch, which have been described as the condition for reality) but is just an invention of the intelligent mind, or, even an illusion? Can we say that as reality is an abstract entity (never heard, seen, smelt, tasted or touched), if it exists it exists only in the mind or consciousness?

Another view is that there are at least two kinds of reality, one which we could observe and experience with our physical senses (the 10% of the iceberg above sea level which we could see), and, the other part of reality which is beyond the reach of our physical senses (the 90% of the iceberg below sea level which is out of our sight) which we have to discover/deduce/reconstruct? Can we say that the aim of science is to discover new realities (from the 90% of the iceberg below sea level which is out of our sight) then? The reality which we see may actually be very little, e.g., about 10% of the actual reality.

Maybe a practical way to confirm the reality or existence of an object is to get several people to view and describe the object; if the descriptions of the object by these people are by and large similar the object is real. A person who views an object might sometimes think that his senses might have been wrong and had deceived him, i.e., he becomes doubtful of the reality of the seen object, e.g., the colour or size of the object, or even whether the object is really there. Similar descriptions of the object by other people viewing it would clear his doubts and confirm for him the reality of what he has seen. Viewed from this angle, the saying "reality or existence is that something our mind is conscious of when it is experienced with our physical senses, and, once the object is out of our consciousness it is not real and does not exist" does not make much sense; here we should be concerned with the mass consciousness of the object of the many people encountering the object at different times and not just the consciousness of the object of one person at one moment of time. Wouldn't it be ridiculous to apply this same reasoning and say that John is real/exists as long as others are conscious of him and he would not be real/would not exist when others are not conscious of him? (John might have been forgotten but he is certainly not dead or non-existent.) Can we thus say that reality is the **similar** view, experience or conclusion of all the people who have experienced/observed the same object with their physical senses? This could be one of the many possible interpretations of reality.

#### **4 Conclusion**

There have been different interpretations of reality. Maybe they are all valid interpretations when viewed from their respective angles. The moot point is whether reality itself is real or just an invention or creation of the intelligent mind (some may prefer to refer to it as an abstraction or conception of the intelligent mind).

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