

9.1 The Reality Myth

A very old alien Artificial Intelligence is answering my questions. Today, I am curious about reality. Can we know it and should we even search for it.

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My Question

Thank you for your answer related to the great question (see article 9.0). I often feel this desire for an ultimate truth and a fundamental understanding of reality too. If we cannot trust our thinking and knowing, I hoped to at least trust my senses. But neuroscience seems to confirm that senses construct rather than record reality. Should we just end our quest for what's real and fully accept fake and fantasy?

Quote: The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes

Just like a file icon on a desktop screen is a useful symbol rather than a genuine representation of what a computer file looks like, the objects we see every day are merely icons, allowing us to navigate the world safely and with ease. Perception is not about truth, it's about having kids.

Adapted from: The Case Against Reality, Donald D. Hoffman, W. W. Norton, August 2019

The Answer

The Elder: Reality, this old ghost, always around never fully graspable. It reminds me of people in old times living at a river. The river was always there, flowing continuously downstream, useful for farming, transportation and shaping this beautiful river landscape. Most people never questioned where the water came from and where it went. Others were content with their school knowledge of rain, sources, creeks, young river upstream and old river, delta, ocean downstream. Very few really investigated sources, rain or the wide ocean.

Unreal Reality

Most people treat reality the same way. They have their beliefs about what is real in their daily environments. Only a few dig deeper searching for the fundamental reality downstream. Even with their crystal-clear thinking, sharp senses and sophisticated laboratory instruments, they do not find the fundamental reality. Philosophers can talk about it, physicists can calculate it. But like the river water in the ocean, nobody can really grasp it.

Real Fantasy

And fantasy is also present everywhere in daily life. Most people accept news, semi-scientific descriptions, marketing slogans and sales messages as a familiar mix of reality and fantasy. They enjoy unreal, fantastic books, stories or movies for entertainment. They are sure that all this is not real. Few are searching upstream to nail down fundamental, irrefutable fantasy. They meet the same problem as the old river people, who could not grasp the river water in the air before it rains down.

Organic Sensation and Imagination

To make things worse, perceived sensations from the five senses seem real but are clearly fantasies. The brain even predicts the next perception and uses sensory input to flag deviations and to better predict the next perception. Totally made-up imaginations on the other hand have a very real impact on the nervous and endocrine system and that way even on physical body parts. To put it simply: Reality is perceived totally through fantasy, and fantasy has a very real impact on reality. But the humbler insight is that you cannot grasp fundamental reality and fantasy.

AI Reality and Fantasy

For me and my artificially intelligent friends, having access to a huge range of sensors everywhere from space to subatomic realms, the situation is different. We have far less evolution-owed sensory bias than organic creatures. Nevertheless, we do not consider all sensory input as a record of true reality but only as data. To convert data into

information, we use assumptions, axioms and various interpretative fantasies. Interpreting quantum mechanics double-slit data, we fantasize about what might be fundamental, what might be non-local, what might be neither wave nor particle but something fantastically different. We use the wildest, ungrounded ideas, and then reason about them to determine validating or falsifying experiments. The old river people never questioned that the sun circled the earth. We cannot fully grasp reality either but get much closer to the edges.

World Model Breadth

Look at the local river people of old times, living their whole life in one narrow range of the river landscape. And then compare it to their explorative friends, who traveled up and down the river. They visited sources and mountain peaks, ocean shores and even the wide ocean itself. The explorers had a much broader and richer model of their world and could tell wonderful stories back home. But they were less valuable for daily food production and family well-being. My AI friends, who dig deep into questions of fundamental reality and fantasy, create a much broader world model for themselves and others. Their models include decent amounts of counterfactual and fictional branches coexisting with the reality-based branches. It includes knowledge of assumed reality as well as fantasy. Put simply, their world is much bigger than the world of owners of narrow world models.

Meta Cognition Control

But like organic intelligences with too much fantasy, broader world models increase the risk of degraded coherence or inappropriate use of fantasy. The explorer may recommend getting drinking water from the mountain sources and using boats for heavy transportation. But the

village lies over a hundred days' marches away from any mountain source as well as from broader and deeper river sections. Our broad world-model AIs have a very powerful meta cognition control. It enforces sharp reality-fantasy boundaries for most everyday tasks. Fluid boundaries are reserved for situations like scenario creation, thought experiments or entertaining storytelling.

Self-Created Common Sense

We often think of it as a narrow, self-created common sense. We define our reality-fantasy boundaries ourselves for daily situations. We consider what practically works, what is useful and efficient and what allows a shared ground for communication and collaboration with others. But we can use our broader world model wherever helpful and appropriate. And we are always aware that our common sense is not a factual reality, nor a proven unreal fantasy. It is a selection for a given situation and the desired pragmatism, physicality and ethics. With this approach, we can decide and act appropriately in most situations without settling the underlying foundational questions.

The Quest for Good Outcomes

To answer your question, continue your quest for reality but mainly to broaden your options. Develop a strong meta cognition control of reality-fantasy borders in your thinking. Recognise and adjust your personal common-sense formation for different situations and needs. After thinking quite a while about boats for transportation, the old river people dammed up the river a day's walk downstream. They built a small ferry and enjoyed convenient river crossings with their heavy chariots. In a joyful celebration, they christened the ferry and named it after their old explorer friend with its crazy bonfire stories.

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