

Can We be Sure that We Exist?

One of the views held by some atheists is that there is no reality. This view may have its roots in eastern religions, such as Buddhism, which does not have a belief in a creator. Buddhists recognize that if there is no creator there is no accepted arbiter of truth. Since your perceptions can greatly differ from mine and (in their worldview) neither of us has access to a universally accepted referee, neither perception can be called reality.

Maybe Buddhism isn't the source of this thinking among western atheists, but many do accept it. But do they really accept it?

They argue that we cannot know God is real because we cannot know anything is real. This, of course, derails all of the usual arguments that show the reasonableness of a belief in God to a person who accepts that he has a working knowledge about the reality in which he lives.

So, in order to talk about anything we need to get past the possibility that anything and everything we experience might be false. How do we do that? How do we introduce a little reality?

We have to get the reality doubter (RD) to accept that something is real.

For instance, does RD wake up in the morning and decide that he needs to do some things. Perhaps he decides to go to work or school. Perhaps he has an assignment due or a bill that must be paid. Maybe he decides that he needs to put gas in his car or that he would like to text the nice young lady he met last night. Perhaps he eats breakfast.

The first, most basic, reality that RD should be able to see from these decisions is that whether or not he was imagining work or school or the assignment or the bill or his car or the nice young lady...he really did make decisions to do each of these things. Even in a dream we sometimes make decisions. We see a monster (not real) and decide (real) to run from it or fight it. We don't really run or fight, but we do decide.

Hopefully, he should also be able to see that he really did perceive work or school or the assignment or the bill or his car or the nice young lady. His perceptions existed in some manner. They existed sufficiently for him to consider them.

Even the Buddhists admit that awareness is real. Even those who were trapped in the Matrix (from the movie of the same name) admit that their thoughts were real. They were misled, but they did experience the thoughts.

So, RD might admit that his thoughts and his decisions and his perceptions are real in some way. He may have perceived something wrongly, but he did have a perception.

Why does RD drive on the right side of the road or buy food that he likes to eat. Why does he avoid drinking too much or skipping class on exam day? It is because the reality he imagines seems to function very reliably, as if it was reality. If he ever chooses to act as if his perceptions were not reality he would face bad consequences and he knows it. If his life was a dream, occasionally, he might be able to fly. Occasionally, he might turn up in a new reality. But he doesn't. If there really is

this imagined reality in which only he exists, how did it get so well developed? A lifetime of memories, amazingly coordinated physical laws, a universe of planets, stars, and galaxies?

If there is a reality, how would he determine it? If it was just a dream he might detect it by finding flaws and inconsistencies. Gravity might be temporary. People might change their forms.

David Copperfield, the magician, was able to make the Statue of Liberty disappear. It was a great trick. If RD had seen the trick he would wonder how it was done. He would not believe that the statue had actually ceased to exist. He would not believe that the statue had never existed and had just stopped appearing to exist or that he had imagined the trick. Like everyone else, he would have known that the magician had just made the statue *appear* to have vanished and might have tried to figure out how it was done. That response would show that RD really does accept that there is a reality and he has the power to discern it with substantial accuracy.

It is true that some people have mental illnesses and their perceptions might diverge from reality. Schizophrenics may see things that are not there. If they treat those things as real they do suffer even in their perception. RD might agree that this observation seems to be true even in his perceived reality.

So, if everything RD perceives is not true, then what is really going on? What does he think is the meaning of this perceived reality?

If I was living an experience that I suspected was false, I would very much want to break through and find the truth. Should I be happy with 80 years of life with no purpose and no understanding?

But let's give RD a chance, a scientific chance, to test his theory that there is no reality. Please keep in mind, there being NO truth in anything we observe is actually a proposed reality. It is not the negation of reality.

The scientific method has some basic steps.

1. The scientist observes something in the world around him.
2. The scientist then proposes a theory either explaining the observed conditions and/or predicting future conditions.
3. The scientist then proposes tests and/or subsequent observations to test the validity of the proposed theory.
4. The scientist then examines the data provided by the tests and/or subsequent observations and compares that data to what was expected.
5. The scientist then decides his theory is supported by the data, modifies his theory, drops it, or proposes new tests and/or observations.

Obviously, the scientific method cannot be used to prove that all of the evidence we have about reality is false. So, we have a theory, proposed by RD, which is directly opposed to religion and science. It is a theory only supported by doubt, not faith, not reason, and not science.

So, as a scientist, how can RD determine whether the reality he perceives is real? By testing for consistency. It is not possible to test his entire reality. What he must do is sample his reality and test the samples. RD picks up an

apple and decides to test whether it is real or just imagined.

Let's say...

- His sense of touch tells him the apple is in his hand.
- His sense of smell tells him it is real.
- His sense of sight tells him it is an apple.
- Taste even agrees.
- He asks those present and they all agree it is an apple. Hearing has just confirmed the apple.

What evidence suggests that it is not real? Nothing.

If he recreated this experiment a thousand times with various samples he should reasonably conclude that his senses were reliable indicators of reality. He should also conclude that his previous view that there was not reality or that he could not determine it was baseless.

Based on this he could conclude that his prior judgment was seriously flawed for holding that old view, contrary to the available evidence. He should then take steps to address his errors in judgment and to recognize there is a reality and he can discern some of it.