

Real consciousness in an unreal world?

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What is real? How do I know? Am I real? What am I to know?

These are age-old questions that humanity has been asking in the endless pursuit of the essence of reality. However, as long as the subject-object duality is involved in the real-or-unreal consideration, people will keep debating forever.

Descartes famously stated: "I think; Therefore I am." This statement has been open to various interpretations. In my personal interpretation, I believe it is more like "to think is to be" or simply "existing thinking". Here, it removes the "problematic" role of the subject "I". Additionally, as opposed to having thinking as an action carried out by the subject, thinking is the "title" of (or in other words, the awareness of) the occurrence of mental functioning. Lastly, thinking and being are treated as equal (expressed characteristics of the same phenomenon), without one leading to another unidirectionally. So, in my case, I exist (am real) because thinking happens. Note that thinking is the (unspoken) premise in this debate. Without mental functioning being accepted as the basis, there would be no discussions on the matter. One simply cannot engage in the debate without thinking; it is apparent and straightforward.

Think about the popular notion: "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?". But now we add a further "twist". Assumed there is (nearly) no information priorly available related to this mysterious "tree", the saying becomes: "If a [unknown] [unknown] in a [unknown] and nothing is around to interact with it, does it [unknown]?" Obviously, the question is now

ridiculous and cannot even be discussed. It is similar to asking a blind person if red mixing with blue would become purple.

Before going deeper, let us look at a more “objective” example in the absence of the self (or the conscious subject), for the sake of idea demonstration. Suppose we are talking about whether time is real or not. Time is the characteristic (or in a sense, a derivative) of change. Change needs to exist as a premise of the consideration of time. In fact, changes need to happen for the discussion to happen at all. To avoid unnecessary mental gymnastics when it comes to interpreting the notion of “change”, we can also call it “perceived difference” instead (but now it will drag the conscious subject back to the debate). So, it is helpful to set boundaries for concepts, which is exactly how the human brain is naturally wired to function. But what do these boundaries represent? I personally think they mean “information involved in the happening interaction” - or simply the “existing interaction”.

When presenting the core concepts behind the framework of information’s dimensions, I mentioned how treating information itself as interactions eliminates the subject-object duality of observation (Le, 2023a, 2023b). Information that does not interact with anything does not exist, since existence is the derived characteristic of interaction, no matter how low-energy that interaction may be. This is the difference between true “nothingness” (that which does not interact) and the notion of nothingness (the negation of everything - which is itself an existing information). True “nothingness” cannot be mentioned, cannot be understood, and of course cannot be debated. If we interact with (e.g. think about) “nothingness”, then it is the latter, not the former. Here we often see the strategy of “negation of negation” when people try to entertain such an idea - in other words: it is not it, and it is also not not-it.

Now, let us look at the other apparent side of the information-as-interaction concept: anything that interacts exists. While this is the base of human consciousness, reality does not rely solely upon human consciousness. As

presented in my former text, all interactions are self-observations (Le, 2023a, 2023b). Every subject-object relationship is mutual and internal, thus needs not an external observer for “awareness”. Human consciousness (the mind) seems different than other systems due to its high complexity and inherent uniqueness. Note that the usual sense of awareness in human observation is in fact the result of a complex set of interactions (e.g. mental activities). Rather direct observations can be conducted by the human mind yet cannot be communicated properly due to its simple-cognitive-processing nature. Think about the “empty-minded” state during deep meditation but still highly alert; such experiences feel “firm” and “direct”, but almost impossible to be interpreted and communicated even to oneself (e.g. recalling or describing). Again, regarding the subject in traditional subject-object debates, the ego tends to be treated as a single-point concept and put in the position of the subject in a linear fashion. However, the ego is a huge set of ongoing interacting information, and thus cannot function as a single static subject.

Common metaphors about life in the modern world include comparing living to playing video games or dreaming. The term “virtual reality” may come to mind, pointing at something seemingly real, yet in fact unreal. But at the core of the matter, there is nothing unreal here, only incompatible interpretations. A video game is real, including its display from multiple pixels, sounds from the speakers, code for logical processing, etc. The perceptions of the game world are also real, as all the inputs are perceived by the senses and processed by the brain to produce such experiences. The game world exists during its interactions with the player’s mind. However, if the player believes the game world to be physical, then that would be an incompatible interpretation. The same reasoning can be applied to the case of dreaming as well. The dream world exists within its interactions with the dreaming self. Upon waking up, the person can make comparisons with immediate information (“real world”) and retrospectively interpret the dream world to be “unreal” (incompatible with current beliefs). If a person has been

dreaming from birth and will never wake up, then the dream world is the only point of reference for perceptions of reality.

And thus, if this life, within this three-dimensional universe, is similar to that of a dream or a super-immersive virtual reality, then we will never know as long as we are living in it. If the world was unreal, would human consciousness also be unreal? As discussed, if there is interaction, then that information exists. Being conscious, in itself, means that consciousness exists, and thus is real. “To be aware is to be”. All information in direct interactions (observations) of consciousness also exist and are real. Incompatible interpretations also exist and are real. In fact, humanity is full of wrong ideas and beliefs; it is an ugly obvious reality. In layman’s terms, it can be said like this: “I think; Therefore I am – even when I may be absolutely insane.”

To close off this writing, I want to give a straightforward message to the concern “What if everything is unreal and meaningless?”; to that I say: It doesn’t matter how something is interpreted outside of my awareness, because whatever I am experiencing is real.

References

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