



Reality: A Very Short Introduction

Jan Westerhoff

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Is matter real? Are persons real? Is time real? This Very Short Introduction discusses what, if anything, is "real" by looking at a variety of arguments from philosophy, physics, and cognitive science. Jan Westerhoff shows that the question "what is real?" is not some esoteric puzzle that only philosophers ponder. Scientists also ask this question when they investigate whether candidates for the fundamental constituents of matter are actually "out there" or just a mere abstraction from a successful theory and cognitive scientists ask it when trying to find out which set of the bewildering array of data processed by our brain could constitute the basis for the self.

Reality: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Marwa says

A mind twisting book :)

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Any of these is plausible but none are definitive and they are not fully compatible with each other as a whole.

My own view is the relaxed one that the term 'reality' as descriptor of anything specifically meaningful is as useless as the terms 'love' and 'freedom'. These are rhetorical terms where the meaning lies not in the word but in the use of it to assert a position without full explanation.

It is also an 'introducer' word - it is useful for introducing us to something that does exist for us functionally by acting as a portmanteau 'folder' for many things that are mostly not like each other but which have similarities, being more like each other than they are like anything else.

The introducer word, far from representing something real (certainly not the nonsensical Platonic Ideal), represents an attribute of all things within its folder.

Reality 'really' means a word used to bring a lot of related ideas together through the shared attribute of presuming that they describe the nature of the world as existing. Any flaw in the book is simply the inherent flaw in analytical philosophy.

Having been given a word, the analytical philosopher feels that he must discover its meaning through the language game of analysis. The folder must, it would seem, be obliged into meaning to make sense of the academic or intellectual world.

Naturally, all that happens in this book is that our very capable analytical philosopher can come to no conclusion that is finally plausible, providing merely a menu of intellectually coherent possibilities which we probably choose between on grounds of aesthetics more than logic.

There are small points of analysis where I find myself disagreeing with Westerhof while appreciating the crispness of his reasoning and the depth of his knowledge of science (and the clarity of his exposition) only because he simply cannot not rely on a 'given' language that maybe a false friend.

One area of discomfort is the way that the coding theory of ultimate reality is allowed to remain in the air as a gateway to a logic that may not be there.

It is as if the academic community simply cannot cope with the possibility that Platonism, logic and mathematics (the 'intellectual') might break down at a certain point - and that this must not be allowed to happen at any costs.

The paradox is that the determined attempt to ensure that all things can be encompassed within the intellectual results in a door being opened to the non-intellectual in a way that is more disturbing than the mere unknowable absolute irrationalism of the abyss.

This is the problem of 'theory' which has plagued humanity with often murderous results since the class of priest and intellectual first emerged.

Every description of ultimate reality is so concerned to extrapolate human-scale thought process into the abyss of unknowing, beyond the limits of current science, that it falls into the trap of allowing space for 'spirit' or a 'code' from outside.

It is as if a deep irrationalism at the base of reality is so terrifying that the intellectual (of whatever background) must be prepared to accept a rationalised irrationality rather than accept that there may not be anything rational there at all.

Westerhoff, to his credit, cannot be accused of going beyond his brief but I worry more than a little about leaving a gap where logic or mathematics ends and then not debating what might fill it on terms that say more positively - "we simply cannot know".

The 'silence' leaves a gap into which anything may flow as if it knew the answer to the implicit question.

This is rather dangerous because it allows an irrationalist spirituality in through the back door, as those who are desperate for meaning seize hold of the fact that something has (it would seem) to fill the gaps left by (say) the limits of quantum mechanics.

The constant desperate attempt by New Age fluffies to link quantum effects to the existence of some universal consciousness is terribly sad but is not helped by scientists who start extrapolating ancient myths into the territory that defeats their best endeavours at final knowledge.

As a result, culturally, we find ourselves with increasingly hysterical appeals to the spirit in order to explain what is simply not understood matter. Instead of continuing to use a rational language of materialism to describe the unknown, the unknown gets reinvented as 'God' or worse.

Perhaps what is lacking in the book is simply the courage to leap ahead and say that not only do we not know X or Y, we may never know and, in that gap, we can either admit our lack of knowledge and remain embedded in material realities which function for us as we are ...

... or we can engage in the fluffy thinking of filling what we do not know with copies of our thought processes and then reinventing what is known as some sort of spirit or consciousness, an absurd tautology loaded with socio-political threats.

A second area of cultural interest is in the continued attempt to denigrate our sense of self simply because of the logical truths of our own perceptions and biology that lead to uncertainty - and the insistence of taking some reified permanent self at face value (as supplied by history) as our 'Aunt Sally'.

This is bound up with a third issue, the reality of time, where, again, a non-issue from our perspective as humans in the world (the subjective reality of the arrow of time) is exploited to create functional uncertainty in ourselves in relation to our perception of the present.

The point is that our primitive view of self and of time as 'real' (in the fixed sense required by our historic culture) may be entirely false without it diminishing the reality of ourselves as Selves and of Time, not merely to us but as a functionally useful and consistent social reality.

The problem lies in the conventional separation of Past, Present and Future. Westerhoff falls into the trap of taking it face value as if he can only communicate with his readers by accepting their 'givens'. But there never is a Present for human beings because of their perceptual apparatus.

What we have is a currently-being-processed immediate past (that we call the present) that is anticipating from experience an wholly unknowable future and matching the most recent data to not only internal memories and habits but the fixed capital of society and the material world.

Once we think of things in this way then our position as conscious beings becomes less passive, less of the instant loss of the future into the past through an unknowable but apparently perceived present and more the creation of the future through the immediate past's fast-moving and creative dialogue with the inherited past.

The Self thus becomes a very real entity as the processing unit creating immediate futures out of the dialectic of recent pasts and out of the materiality and history of the 'given' (the 'real' past to all intents and purposes).

The continuity that creates the Self is this process of moving forward at a rollicking pace until death or some other disruption (such as severe mental illness or incapacity).

The fact that much of the recent past is lost into the 'given' (albeit that some of this becomes embedded in the sub-conscious, unused memory and somatic symptoms) does not make the Self any less real. It ensures that it is making choices (often sub-conscious) about its own future.

The arrival of uncertainty at the margins of science, combined with the desperate desire to imagine meanings and seek certainties where none are to be found, offers profound cultural threats to humanity.

The idea that there is gap in what we know that must be filled with something (when there is no reason to fill it with anything) creates the space for the new obscurantism now leaching out from a troubled America into Europe.

This is the New Age nonsense of insisting on spirit without evidence except as lack while the idea that we are not selves but fluid objects in the given environment without free will is dangerous when governments and authorities are looking for excuses to deprive us of that free will.

The fact that the assault on freedom is given a false scientific basis should worry us exceedingly because scientists are now far too ready to jump from what they do know (through scientific method) to what they do not know but is politically convenient to know.

Here is an example from the Neuro-Scientist Head at the NIDA in a recent interview:

" Dr. Volkow generally forswears any interest in politics per se, but midway through a long day of meetings last month she sighed and acknowledged, "science and politics are intertwined." We think we have free will, she continued, but we are... foiled at every turn.

" First our biology conspires against us with brains that are hard-wired to increase pleasure and decrease pain. Meanwhile, we are so gregarious that social systems — whether you call them peer pressure or politics — reliably dwarf us as individuals. "There is no way you can escape.""

She is wrong - more worryingly, she is in an influential position in being wrong. Her scientific expertise is not in doubt but her judgement on society and politics is as flawed as that of an autistic Soviet engineer.

In fact, we can and do challenge societal norms and we can rewire our plastic brains through the exercise of will and thought in ways that are not simple matters of pleasurable or painful instinct. We can even unlearn pain and revise our pleasures.

What is going on here is that a desperate scientific and political elite subconsciously (if not consciously) wants the tools to ensure that we never question norms that are convenient to them.

Perhaps a particular vision of our late liberal society in despair demands that we never exercise the free will and reason that our masters increasingly wish to claim is deficient or even non-existent.

This attitude is dangerous because we are being persuaded to trust that scientists are right about things that

הנה פה חלק מהפרק הזה על ההיסטוריה של ישראל. זהו פרק חשוב מאוד, ואתם צריכים לקרוא אותו attentively. הפרק הזה עוסק בהיסטוריה של ישראל, מהמאה ה-19 ועד היום. זהו פרק חשוב מאוד, ואתם צריכים לקרוא אותו attentively. הפרק הזה עוסק בהיסטוריה של ישראל, מהמאה ה-19 ועד היום. זהו פרק חשוב מאוד, ואתם צריכים לקרוא אותו attentively.

Petra says

It was so good! So informative and written in such a fun way! Made me very excited, especially the chapter about time.

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Matrioshka computer?.

Three: Are persons real?, here speculates with the spatial and temporal location of the self, with mental and real experiments as Dennett's tale Where Am I?, the rubber hand illusion, the virtual full-body illusion, the problem of integration of information arriving at different times to the brain in a single experience and finally the Memetics theory of self, the self as an illusion, an emergent think from the memes interaction, being the memes different sort of ideas.

Fourth : Is time real ?, here the author plays with the consequences of special relativity theory, Mc Taggart that the time is not real is an illusion, the Godel idea of time and finally the idea that at most fundamental level the world is wholly static.

The final chapter is a recap of this all.

A little book full of very deep disturbing reflections that widens the thought to new unknown frontiers.
A challenging recommendable book

Andrew Langridge says

I came to this book expecting to find an outline of the philosophical debate between realists and anti-realists, but ended up rather disappointed. The author has chapter headings on Dreams (Idealism), Matter, Persons and Time, which he introduces with some helpful points; but then moves frustratingly fast onto 'evidence' for realism from the natural sciences, without pausing to consider whether scientific ideas do not themselves presuppose some minimal conception of reality. For example, there is barely any discussion of influential instrumentalist ideas concerning scientific truth, such as those of Kuhn, Duhem and Quine. If scientific evidence is prized, the debate between Einstein and Bohr over the meaning of quantum physics would have been highly relevant in this context. In the chapter on matter, the author usefully delineates criteria for increasing strengths of realism: 'the Matrix definition' (private criterion), 'the 1984 definition' (public criterion), the 'Johnson definition' (independence criterion), the 'apocalyptic definition' (no minds criterion) and the 'turtle definition' (reductionist criterion). But he then proceeds to duck the most important issues by concentrating almost exclusively on the apocalyptic definition, backed up by an unquestioning identification of mind with brain.

Bojan Tunguz says

Oftentimes the simplest ideas and concepts are the ones that are hardest to understand. This is certainly true with the concept of "reality." In our everyday lives we take it for granted, and even in most professional and scientific contexts this is an almost entirely unproblematic term. However, when we push against the frontiers of our knowledge, as is the case in many subfields of physics, psychology, and philosophy, we quickly encounter situations where "reality" has to have a very precise technical meaning if we want to understand some of the most fundamental phenomena of the world that we live in. "Reality: A Very Short Introduction" tackles many such exceptionally tricky considerations, and brings the ideas from the forefront of science and philosophy to the general audience.

In relatively few pages, this very short introduction manages to bring forth some of the most enduring problems that have stymied philosophers, scientists, and other thinkers for centuries. The book is divided

into four chapters, each of which addresses one aspect of our understanding of reality. The chapters are: 1. Dreams and simulations, 2. Is matter real?, 3. Are persons real?, 4. Is time real? These chapters provide a general overview of the topics that have framed our discussion about reality. The author relies on variety of disciplines for his assertions and findings, but the primary source of ideas about reality come from physics, philosophy, and psychology. In a sense, these disciplines may be thought of as representing three aspects of reality that we encounter in all aspects of our lives: psychological, physical, and metaphysical. The weight that we assign to each one of these aspects will probably depend on our own ways that we think of reality, but it is fair to say that all of them play a fundamental and important role.

This book is very well written and all explanations are lucid and clear. However, this is not a book that you can easily wade through. The nature of reality is a complex subject, and the means of analyzing it and the kinds of arguments that this analysis employs require a reasonably high level of intellectual discipline and appreciation for abstract thinking. If you are willing to invest some of it, then after reading this short book you'll come away with a renewed sense of appreciation for the world that we live in at its most fundamental level.

Clifford says

"A Very Short Introduction" and obviously not a complete discussion of the subject, but not a bad summary of the arguments in this complex field.

Eslam Gamal says

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