

[Essay]

## The Human Dilemma Life Between Illusion and Reality

Ben G. Yacobi<sup>\*</sup>

### **Abstract**

The human mind struggles to grasp reality, but in practical terms can only generate various concepts and theories that have their limitations. Identifying their boundaries of applicability is essential. If these boundaries and limits are not well defined, concepts and theories may turn into dogmas and one is left with illusions of understanding. Concepts and theories cannot fully describe the ultimate reality due to the inaccessibility to all the elements of emergent reality, and due to the inherent unknowability of all that remains to be discovered and understood. Thus, some disconnect from reality is inevitable and humans are caught between illusion and reality. The fundamental problem of illusions seizing the individual's awareness is the resulting reluctance to see things as they are and to be seen without illusions.

### **Illusion and Reality**

Human beings are caught between illusion and reality, as the mind dwells in the subjective world of ideas and concepts, but physically one exists in the world of objective reality that cannot be directly experienced or fully understood. This is further complicated by the use of reason and logic to guide the mind to truth, as they rely on language that is inadequate for describing reality and often leads to paradoxes.

There is no definitive answer to the question of what reality is. In broadest terms, one can define reality as all that exists, irrespective of whether or not it can be observed or understood. One can distinguish between apparent reality and ultimate reality, as well as between physical or human-independent reality and mental or human-constructed reality. Physical reality is defined as extended in space, having physical properties such as mass, and existing independently of the observer. Mental reality has no extension in space and exists only in the minds of individuals, with its existence depending on the observer. But whether

---

<sup>\*</sup> B.G. Yacobi has a PhD in physics. He held research positions at Imperial College London and Harvard University, as well as teaching positions in universities in the United States and Canada. Email: b.yacobi[a]utoronto.ca.

one thinks in terms of trees and rocks or atomic particles and light quanta, their reality appears to human observers as a partial representation of the ultimate reality. It is essential to distinguish between different types of reality, and between the representation of reality in the mind and reality itself.

Ultimate reality cannot be defined by concepts or words. It could be thought to be unchangeable. But hardly anything in the universe is truly permanent. There is no assurance that even physical laws and constants will remain the same with cosmic evolution. The ultimate truth may not even exist. Moreover, the ultimate reality is unreachable, as it is uncertain how much of reality is completely unknown or inaccessible to human reason and understanding.

Individual human beings emerge in the world in a specific era and place, and they have relatively short lives in the constant presence of uncertainty and death. During this limited existence, the individual has to adapt to the outside world in an endless struggle against the unknown. The limits of existence, cognitive biases, and the boundaries of understanding can result in illusions, which can be perceived as reality. These are the illusions of knowledge and understanding, of faith and certainty, of time and eternity, of freedom and free will, and of the meaning of life. Illusions can also evolve from imagination unsupported by facts. Illusions offer existential comfort, but they may also result in a reluctance to see things as they are and to be seen without illusions.

Recognizing the mysterious nature of reality, one struggles to distinguish between illusions and reality. But it is not always clear whether one arrives at a deeper understanding of reality or just moves from one illusion to another. Knowingly or unknowingly, the human tendency is to distort reality to make it more endurable. The human mind is steered towards illusions that are adaptable to one's needs and desires. It is difficult to tell where reality ends and illusions begin, as the transition between them is often unclear and inconsistent.

The human perception of the world is shaped by language. But both language and understanding of reality through any form of language are fundamentally limited. The question is whether words represent reality, or a concept of reality, or reduced representations of reality, or whether words and language may even generate separate realities.

The limits of perception, interpretation and cognition do not allow a complete understanding of reality. Human perceptions of the world and concepts for their interpretation are entangled and inseparable. To a great extent, the perceived reality is intricately intertwined with illusions of observations and

their interpretations. It is hard to reduce the description of reality to a single truth or to a minimal set of basic elements.

The human mind is confined to the brain, which is full of limitations and which inhibits the mind from a detached perspective. The mind does not have direct contact with reality. The limits imposed on human senses and tools that extend them allow a perception of only a small portion of reality. Even those attributes of the observable universe that are available to senses and scientific instruments can be distorted by their filters and by cognitive biases. Thus, the human mind is constrained, both physically and conceptually, by its limitations and programming. In effect, the physical and mental states of being determine what one thinks or how one perceives and interprets reality.

As the human brain is confined to a three-dimensional world, the mind is also constrained by these conditions. Mathematical cognition provides an extension beyond the natural boundaries of thought. However, the mind is not capable of conceiving things beyond the boundaries of logical and mathematical cognition, as well as beyond the conceptual limitations.

The human senses are limited; they determine the boundaries of the observable world. Yet, in moment-to-moment awareness of the present, there is the illusion that one perceives the whole world, rather than its fraction. One can confuse 'reality' with 'appearances' or the fragments of what can be observed. The ultimate dilemma is determining the reality behind the appearances, and ensuring that a determined reality itself is not an appearance of a deeper reality.

Scientific abstractions are approximations to reality, not reality itself. Scientific theories can only offer limited maps of reality, but not an accurate representation of reality. It is uncertain how much of reality is completely unknown or inaccessible to human senses, tools, reasoning, and language. In the final analysis, one can never be certain of the direct correspondence between theory and reality. One can only judge any theory on the basis of its predictive ability.

Humans strive for structure and predictability as antidotes to the chaos and uncertainty of life. Individuals are always part of some structure. They are inserted into an on-going world, or a given society, or culture, or religion, on which the individual has only an insignificant influence. One either tries to adapt to a given structure or free oneself from it. But even if one succeeds to liberate oneself from a given structure, one still ends up in a different structure. The hardest part is complete liberation from all the confines that include self and ego,

and society and environment, and moving beyond the illusory world of senses, and observing the world directly as it is.

As the world is perceived through the images formed and stored in the minds of individuals, the question is whether these images, which are just pictorial representations of objects and not the actual objects, truly represent reality and how they influence the perception and interpretation of reality. The important issue is how to free the mind from preconceived ideas, and look at every image from a fresh perspective, without any influence of prior semantic context.

The observable reality appears sufficiently structured to speculate on some kind of design and, for some, on an unknowable designer. In this context, the fundamental dilemma of human life is that, although the cognitive limits do not allow the mind to interpret objective reality as completely meaningful, the mind cannot accept reality as absolutely meaningless. There is always uncertainty and ambiguity about the meaning of the universe and human life.

## **Concepts**

Concepts, the building blocks of theories, are structured ideas that can be communicated using symbolic systems such as natural language or mathematics. Concepts and theories are human constructs; they have no independent existence outside of the mind and are always partial and provisional.

Human experiences and views are shaped by various concepts, which are approximate representations of reality in the mind, and as such there is no direct correspondence between them and reality. But these concepts offer some measure of certainty and structure for communicating observations and ideas in a constant search for truth and knowledge. The fundamental angst of existence is in trying to reconcile the human desire of inhabiting an ordered and purposeful universe with the inescapable fact that at a fundamental level the universe is probabilistic and human existence is uncertain. The conceptual framework provides a kind of existential shelter against the constant uncertainty of life and it also offers some measure of solace of a relatively knowable and predictable universe. However, concepts and theories may also create false impressions of understanding, making it difficult to distinguish between illusions and reality.

Concepts tend to confine the human mind. The dilemma is that one must

both develop concepts and doubt them, and one must both learn and unlearn in order to make some sense of reality. Otherwise, one is constrained by incomplete concepts and is left with illusions of understanding. As all concepts are human constructs, they have their limitations. Identifying their boundaries of applicability is essential. If these boundaries and limits are not accurately defined and understood, concepts may turn into dogmas and illusions.

The human mind has a tendency to get attached to concepts, which often become entrenched illusions in the mind. One example is the concept of time, which is indispensable for human experience, as it defines life and gives it a meaning. But time is not real in a strict sense; what is real is change or process. Time is a measure of change, such as motion or aging, against a reproducible standard such as planetary motion or a clock. Such changes are ingrained in the human mind from birth and thus appear as natural attributes of life. Human lifetime is a relative measure of the process of biological aging, as measured in relation to the process of the earth's rotation around the sun. Time does not exist as an objective physical reality; it is a human construct that provides a context to the constantly changing world. In fact, what one experiences throughout life is not time itself, but change; and every device used to measure time is based on measuring change. But the illusion of the reality of time is so ingrained in the human mind that life is perceived as a flow through time. And as that time is finite for the mortal human, it is the most precious attribute of life.

## **Freedom and Free Will**

Other important concepts are freedom and free will. The question is whether one is free to make choices independent of external factors or whether one's choices and actions are causally determined by preceding events and conditions. The perception that one has free will is ingrained in human experience – from mundane choices, such as what to wear or eat, to choices that influence the direction of one's life. But does one really have complete freedom of choice? If free will were proven to be an illusion, it would imply that individuals are not responsible for their actions, thus having profound implications for human civilization that relies on an individual's free will in matters of morality, human relationships, politics, and law.

Human existence and an individual's freedom and free will are constrained

by natural laws, and by physical and cognitive limitations, as well as by economic, political, and societal factors beyond the individual's control. There are also past experiences and decisions that can influence one's choices, as well as cognitive ambiguities and unconscious motivations that may prevent the full understanding of human aspirations and actions. Free will cannot be isolated from the environmental influences, which may be hidden or may not be clearly understood. But the inability to identify the limits and boundaries of freedom and free will can result in illusory perception that they are boundless.

An individual's decisions and choices are mediated by the brain's physical and chemical processes. The complexity of interactions between the billions of neurons in the brain is enormous, and the dynamics of these interactions is constantly changing in response to external and internal influences, generating new thoughts and choices. The conscious mind is limited to only several bits of information or ideas for analysis at a given time, whereas the unconscious mind is inaccessible to conscious awareness. The vast amount of information from the outside world, past experiences and memories, and the range of choices available are in continuous flux, reflecting and shifting within the context of each moment and differing circumstances. These are all intertwined with other factors and processes which are invisible to conscious awareness and which result in unpredictability of human behavior. The great number of factors influencing individual decisions makes it impractical to trace them to their sources with absolute certainty. There are multiple levels of causation, from molecular mechanisms to biological and societal processes, and to behavior. Human behavior and actions are constantly evolving against the background of complex interactions with the environment, including other individuals. One can never know to what extent the individual is the sole source of a choice or action and what is the extent of influences from the outside sources. The seeming lack of causality and the unpredictability of human behavior could be perceived as freedom of choice or as free will.

One can never predict the future with certainty. The perceptions, thoughts, ideas, concepts, and knowledge have no permanence, as they are all constantly fleeting, changing or reinterpreted. Thus, as the future is never certain or fixed, one can develop a conviction of having freedom of choice and free will, even if they are illusions.

## **God and Religion**

The inability to uncover the unknowable, and the need to cope with the forces of nature and human mortality, combined with the desire for finding straightforward cause and effect relationships in the world, make a compelling case for the concept of god. The development of this concept was inevitable from the dawn of human civilization, as there was a need for explanations and assurances of protection.

Enter various religions that offer illusions of certainty in this life and hope for the afterlife. The certainty is established by reconciling with the world through the presence of a higher power. The only life one can experience is diluted in the anticipation of a better existence in another form and reality that may not exist. Religious illusions are reinforced with prayers in the houses of worship that serve as echo chambers. But judging from human history full of natural disasters, wars, and injustices, prayers do not appear to be answered.

Religion is a breeding ground for wishful thinking and illusions. Religious reasoning is self-referential and relies on circular logic. The fundamental problem is that relying on concepts that cannot be verified and accepting things without evidence may result in detachment from reality. No one has a monopoly on the truth, and faith cannot be a substitute for it.

Bowing to the unknowable that keeps its silence and can never be reached will always compel humans to fashion the unknowable within the limits of human understanding and imagination. Thus, the unknowable is reduced to a set of incomplete human concepts that diminish and devalue that unknowable. Humans in effect created a self-limiting concept of god that is reinforced by its own circular logic. This also imposes limits on religion.

## **Life and Art**

Human life is both a gift and an ordeal. It is full of magnificent moments, memories, and experiences against the dark background of pain, suffering, and the dread of uncertainty and death. The uncertainties and ambiguities of life may result in existential angst. The experiences throughout life, accompanied by constant comparisons and differences between the opposites and choices, create the permanent discontent and nagging feeling that something is missing in life.

At the end of life, after enduring through the endless series of changes, one is left with the understanding that there is no definitive answer to the absurdity of life. In this human drama, individuals are actors looking either for a role, or the original author, or for the primary source of it all.

The perception of life is greatly influenced by the unknowability of death, which catalyzes the quest for self-reflection and meaning. The longing for immortality is the human reaction to the dread of non-existence. But what would be the meaning of endless life? It is hard enough to endure reality with all the uncertainty during the relatively short duration of life. With immortality, the persistent unknowability of the ultimate reality and the tedium of life would become unbearable. But the desire for immortality is so great that human beliefs and aspirations have been shaped by it.

Another human dilemma relates to the question of what constitutes the “good life” and how to achieve it. An important aspect of this question is whether the good life can be based on various illusions, or whether it is better achieved through the search for truth about the nature of the universe. It is easier to adapt illusions to individual desires and needs, unlike the reality that is indifferent to human condition. But then, what is the use of escape from reality through illusions? Life becomes a farce, full of pretense. The search for truth about reality, on the other hand, provides some meaning to life. The struggle to transcend the unknown elevates humans somewhat above their origins.

The concept of the “good life” is difficult to define or measure, as each person has their own way of perceiving what is important or valuable in life. The perception and interpretation of the good life depends on a variety of individual traits and views, as well as personal circumstances, culture, religion, experience, and knowledge. For some, the good life is meeting basic survival needs, or the absence of pain and suffering, or achieving comfort through the acquisition of wealth. For others, it is life without sin according to religious principles, or striving for accurate description of reality according to science. In addition to an individual notion of the good life, there is also a shared vision of the good life related to the aspirations for a just society. Ultimately, nothing is ever good enough, as the desires are endless. From basic needs of life to pursuing greater comfort, the quest for the good life never ends, and it is constantly changing. But there are things that can never be achieved; all that can be realized is always partial and temporary.

Human life is a collection of random moments, memories, thoughts, choices,

experiences, and their biased interpretations. Some of these moments in life are perceived as “good”. Then there are past experiences and decisions that can influence one’s perception of the “good life”. Life must be viewed in its entirety, but it is composed of fragments of events and memories that are collected in the mind, where, like in an abstract composition, the picture of life is formed by a series of good and bad moments.

The world is not conducive to the good life, as recurring difficult situations such as illness or financial problems often interfere with it. One cannot possibly implement all the perceived attributes of the good life. Achieving the good life involves episodes of its partial realization interrupted by random problems, followed by the continuous strive to recover the good life. Everything is in a continuous flux. There is always something or someone that can disrupt one’s life. But nevertheless, there are in life various “good moments” that linger in the mind with recurring recall. If such moments occupy much of the human conscious awareness, they can give an illusion of wellness beyond individual moments.

Art is a creative effort to capture reality and to find its meaning through the illusions of literature, visual arts, and music. Art, as any other illusion, provides consolation for the boredom and adversities of life. It is an effort to both create and escape reality. The paradox is that art distorts reality in order to reveal its essence. The distortion of life by art may cause confusion, as one tends to compare one’s existence with those in the fictional settings of books or films. If one does not recognize them as illusions, one may become dissatisfied with life. The illusory drama will always remain fiction, unlike the unscripted life governed by chance.

Literature, visual arts, and music are symbolic representations of reality, like imagination and thought. However, there is a tendency to confuse those mental realities with physical realities and treat them as if they were real. Thus, a great deal of human effort is directed at dealing with the tension between illusions and realities of life.

Art stretches the boundaries of the human imagination and the perception of reality. Fiction is filled with metaphors, allegories and symbolisms, which are illusions that assign meaning to human reality. Art does not just imitate life; it gets entangled with life and, by creating meaning through illusions and imagination, distorts its reality.

## Conclusion

Humans seek certainty, meaning, knowledge, and the good life in an uncertain world, in which a massive asteroid colliding with the Earth could extinguish humanity. But the nature is what it is, irrespective of any meaning or interpretation attached to it by the human mind. Nature is neither moral nor immoral; it is indifferent to human concepts and desires. The world is constantly changing, and human life is a continuous chain of intertwined random events and is thus largely unpredictable.

Striving to reconcile the seeming absurdity of human existence with the desire to find meaning and purpose in life, it is hard to distinguish between illusion and reality. Although it seems that the laws of nature and the universe are suitable for the emergence of life, cosmic evolution appears indifferent to human survival. Thus, one may inquire whether there is any inherent meaning or purpose to the universe and human life, or whether the emergence of life and human intelligence is nothing more than an evolutionary accident. The possibility of human extinction is real; it would imply the ultimate futility of human efforts in describing reality. All scientific and technological knowledge, literary and musical compositions, and philosophical explanations could disappear in the abyss of nothingness. All the effort to touch reality would be gone in vain, and humanity would be extinguished by the same random chance operating in the universe that caused life in the first place. Such a world hardly makes any sense from a human perspective. But maybe there is a deeper truth about reality and life. One may never know.