

REFUTING THE  
EXTERNAL WORLD

SAMPLE CHAPTER

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*Chapter 1 – Two sides to reality*

"Haven't you always wondered," I begin to ask Walt, "whether things really exist when we no longer observe them?"

"I can't say that I have," he says, "but I'm pretty sure that they do."

We're playful, but this is serious talk and he knows it. Walt has come to me wanting to know the truth. But he regards these kinds of questions as rooted in magical thinking and new age mumbo jumbo, not rational, scientific thought – and he takes great pride in being a rational, scientific person.

"Take this coffee cup, for example," I say. "How do we know that it's still here when we close our eyes?"

"Uh, well—"

"Better yet," I say before he can answer, "how do we know that it exists *right now*?"

He looks puzzled. "What do you mean?" he says, pointing at it. "It's obviously right *here*."

My first job is always to dispel this common sense realism, which, when it comes down to it, really is nothing but fuzzy thinking. For most people, it's the most obvious thing that we have a direct awareness of the external world – but there's an unmistakable contradiction in maintaining that we're in direct contact with things themselves and at the same time make a distinction between *how they appear to us* and *how they really are* – yet everybody seem to employ this Orwellian doublethink all the time.

"Look, when we approach an object and it appears to grow larger, we don't believe that it actually does, do we?" is how I explain it to Walt.

"I guess not," he says.

"And when we see a dinner plate from an angle we don't believe that it really does assume an elliptical shape, right?"

"No, that's just how it looks to us."

This way of thinking—making a distinction between the appearance of a thing and the thing itself—is obviously inconsistent with any notion that we're in direct contact with the actual world. Holding both of these two mutually contradictory views is to insist that we're both seeing things as they really are and that we don't – which is precisely the kind of fuzzy thinking we're looking to eliminate.

"We must realize that *if* we believe that the world is different from how it appears to us, we're effectively *admitting* that we aren't seeing things directly," I explain.

"And since we *do* think in this way," I continue, "since we *do* make a distinction between the world and how it appears to us, we must concede that we aren't in direct contact with things themselves; that we don't see the world directly – that all of *this*," I'm waving my arms, "is merely an *image* of the world."

Walt looks a little lost. These are new ideas. They won't stick right away. But he's recording our conversations, so he can always revisit them later. He doesn't need to grasp every aspect of every detail right now.

I get up and start walking around. "Another way of seeing this is to consider perceptual illusions," I say. "They perhaps best illustrate why we aren't seeing the world directly."

"How so?"

"I mean, if we're in direct contact with things themselves, how is it that a straight stick appears bent when halfway under water? Does the stick actually bend?"

"No, of course not. It just *seems* to," Walt replies.

"My point exactly. And if we acknowledge these illusions—that is, if we think of them *as such*—we must necessarily accept the distinction between the actual world and our experience of it, since the word *illusion* implies a situation where our subjective experience misrepresents objective reality."

"Fair enough," Walt says. "That makes sense."

"And here's another example: Let's say that someone else is watching that stick from another angle. He'll have a completely different experience of it, won't he? One that will be radically different from ours even though we are both looking at the same object?"

"Yep."

"But, would you argue that the stick somehow transforms itself according to who's viewing it? Does it decide to take on another appearance depending on who's watching?"

"No, of course not."

"Then we must conclude that its appearance in each of our respective views must necessarily be separate and different from the stick *as it is in itself* – which as such, remains concealed from us."

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"Concealed from us?" he asks. "What do you mean?"

I sit back down again. "Look," I say, leaning back and placing my hands behind my head. "We've got two sides to reality, right? On the one hand we have the world as it appears to us—" I make a gesture as to indicate all that makes up our present experience; the room that we're in, the furniture; all the stuff around us.

Walt looks around.

"Let's call this *the world of phenomena*," I say. "It's what appears in our direct experience."

"And that's the 'image' you talked about before?" he asks.

"That's right. It's the way the world *looks* to us."

He nods.

"And on the other hand," I continue, "we have the world as it is in itself – *objective reality*. It's the world *as it is* whether or not we're looking – the so called *actual* world."

"And you're saying that it's somehow concealed from us?"

"Yes. Naturally, we can't see it."

"Why not?"

I hesitate for a second. Here's where I could tell him where all of this is going; how he's been led astray; and why we're even talking about this stuff to begin with. But this isn't the time to challenge the fairy tale. If I move too fast he'll just clam up and stop listening.

Walt, and pretty much 99.9 percent of everybody else, thinks that this, so called, actual world is factual rather than fictitious. What we're doing now is laying the groundwork for me to show him otherwise; to show him how to fully grasp how and why the world isn't real – so that in effect he doesn't need to believe it, but that he'll simply see it; directly and effortlessly, without leaning on any outside authority, belief, dogma or theory – he'll simply *know*.

But given how firmly Walt's rooted in the contemporary consensus model of reality, this is going to be an inquiry of steps—at first making major concessions to his way of thinking—all in order to be able to pull the rug out from underneath and simultaneously have him being able to make sense of what's actually happening.

So, for now, we'll go slowly.

"Why can't we see the it?" he asks again, reminding me that I'm in a conversation with him.

"Oh," I snap back to where we were. "If we could see it, it would be our experience – the world of phenomena."

But since we define objective reality by what's there when we're *not* looking, inherent in its logic is the fact that we can't see it."

"I'm not sure I'm following," Walt says.

"That's okay. We'll get back to that in a minute. For the moment, let's just acknowledge that we *do* think in terms of these two sides of reality."

Walt nods. "Sure," he says.

"Now, with the dinner plate in mind, we might think that there's not much of a difference between the two sides – perhaps we think that the difference is merely one of perspective. But when we really think about it, we realize that our thoughts about reality detail a much more fundamental difference. That is, when we actually think things through, we recognize that the difference between *the world as it appears to us* and *the world as it is in itself* is far greater than a mere difference in perspective."

"So, what's the difference then?" Walt asks.

"Well, what is the actual world made of?"

He thinks for a while before he answers. "Atoms and molecules and stuff," he says.

"And yet that's not what we find when we look to our direct experience, do we? Although scientists and philosophers keep telling us that everything is made out of particles and forces, when we look for ourselves we find something entirely different."

He starts to look around. I decide to help him along.

"We don't see the world *as it is in itself*—we don't see forces or photons or subatomic particles—but when we look for ourselves we see the world as it appears to us in terms of our senses. When we look to our direct experience, *colors, sounds* and *touch sensations* is what the world is made out of – not 'atoms and molecules and stuff.'"

He concentrates even more. This turning towards one's own experience; to investigate for oneself, is of paramount importance. And seeing that Walt does suddenly makes me remember my own inquiry. I look upon those days with unmatched gratitude – as Walt one day will, when he himself reflects back upon this time when we just began to pull the threads of the fabric.

"You're right," he says. "From the point of view of my direct experience, colors and sounds and touch is what the world is made of. I never thought about it like that."

I nod. "These sensations—visual, auditory and tactile—make up *our experience of the world*. And no matter how closely you look, no matter how much we zoom in, the subatomic particles we believe make up the world never actually appears in our experience. All we ever encounter are these sensations."

"So all of this—" Walt's pointing around the room, "is just... mental?"

"That's right. Visual sensations. Colors. And here's the thing: We can never look on the other side of these sensations, to see what's *really* out there. We can never know whether the image we see is an accurate representation of the real world – whether the subatomic particles that we believe make up the world are something that actually exists."

"But—"

"And neither can the scientists, by the way. The only world they can ever examine is *this one*," I hold out my hands again, "the world that appears to us through our sensorial apparatus – the one *made out of* these sensations. The best they can do is to examine these images in a vain attempt at guessing what's on the other side of them."

Of course, from the scientist's perspective, they're learning about reality. But unless the images themselves correspond to what's really out there, all they're really



learning about are *sensations* – and whether or not the images *do* correspond to reality, we can never know.

"It's as if we're living in this private virtual depiction of a world from which we're forever shut out," is how I explain it to Walt. "An inescapable dreamscape that's merely representing a reality that in itself is made forever unknowable by one simple fact:"

He stares at me. "What?"

*"There is nothing you can do to ever make yourself experience anything other than your own consciousness,"* I reply.

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"Let me get this straight," Walt says. "On the one hand we have the actual world; essentially a bunch of subatomic particles that we never actually see; and on the other, we have our immediate experience, which is categorically different from the objective world in every respect – simply the visual, auditory and tactile sensations that make up the world as *we* know it, and beyond which we can never look."

"Yes, that pretty much sums it up," I say. "But what lies in-between them?"

Walt thinks for a second. "What do you mean?" he says.

"What separates these two sides to begin with?"

He thinks a while longer, and then surprises me with the correct answer. "I do," he says.

"That's right. You have one foot in objective reality—it's where you *exist*—and the other in your immediate experience. And separating the two sides is your apparatus for experiencing; wherein physical reality on the one side is rendered apparent as sensate experience on the other."

Walt thinks for a while. "And by 'apparatus for experiencing', I assume you mean the brain?" he asks.

"Or whatever our experience originates from," I reply.

"It's pretty well established that our experience is produced in the brain," Walt explains.

"You call it 'the brain,' but there's nothing suggesting that this sensorial apparatus of ours couldn't be a computer generating experiential content in a sophisticated simulation, or something like that."

"You mean that we could be in *The Matrix*?"

"Or maybe all of this," I look around, "is simply a dream in a cosmic mind. Or something. My point being, that whatever is giving rise to our experience isn't itself a part of it; any more than a video camera is found in the film it produces. And so, investigating the images says nothing about what kind of device went into producing them, in what kind of reality such a device exists, or if there even is an objective reality *at all* behind them. All we know is that there are images—our direct experience—and any idea that there's anything beyond them remains a unverifiable assumption."

"But according to that logic, there might not be an 'apparatus for experiencing' either, right?"

"Correct. Maybe there's nothing but this field of experiencing," I say, looking around. "But as long as we maintain the idea of an 'objective reality', a so called 'apparatus for experiencing' must necessarily exist in order to account for our subjective experience of that reality. It comes with the package, so to speak."

He thinks for a while. "So, correct me if I'm wrong," he says, "but our ordinary everyday world is merely a mirage on display by our sensorial apparatus—the nature of which is unknown—and when we think we are observing the world, we're in fact looking at the mirage?"

"I don't think 'mirage' is the right word." I say.

Walt thinks for a few moments. "What about 'a perceptual replica' then?"

"Maybe. But that's supposing that our experience is actually representative of an objective reality. It's only a 'replica' if it resembles the original."

"You mean that our experience might not correspond to what's really out there?"

"How could we know?" I say. "All we can ever know is our own perceptions. The actual world—that is, *if such a world even exists*—remains concealed from us."

"Oh, right," he remembers. "I'm trapped in my own experience."

"'Trapped' is a strong word, I think. You can't step out of your experience to see what's beyond it, that's all."

"I'm living in this private virtual depiction of a world from which I'm forever shut out," Walt says. "In what sense am I not trapped?"

I shrug. "Do you want out?"

"Can I?" he asks.

"What if there's nothing out there?" I reply.

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And, of course, that's where we're going – disproving objective reality.

*Disproving it* – not merely making a point about how "we can't know whether or not it's *really there*," like countless others have before me – no; I'm talking about something else.

I'm talking about *disproving* it beyond all doubt.

I'm talking about hacking away at it with irrefutable logic until it *fucking shatters beyond repair*.

It's graduation time, people.

What we've been doing thus far is merely pinpointing where we stand. We have started to untangle what's what and mapped out the broad strokes of consensus reality, but now it's time to move past that; to proceed further down

the rabbit hole and shine with illuminating honesty upon all those specimens of wrong-thinking that's lurking down there.

And that's all I'm asking for – ordinary rational honesty. Walt seems open, but most people aren't. They don't want to see – they're not happy with where they're at, but they're too afraid to move.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

That's what's required; a willingness to live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life. The only way Walt can manage to not see clearly after this inquiry is by outright denial; to put his blinders on, the way people always have when they're confronted with new and unsettling ideas about reality; people that we now look back upon and shake our heads in astonishment at how they could ever believe the things that they did.

The choice to not live in denial can seem like an easy one to make in theory, but it's only vanity that makes us think that we've evolved beyond our ancestors who burned witches at the stake. We're still believers; even today. But if we can recognize that it's our beliefs that form the walls of our imprisonment, we can also recognize that it's honesty that will set us free.

**THIS WAS A SAMPLE CHAPTER**

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