

What Is Real?

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Abstract

What is real? How do you know? How certain can you be? These are the questions addressed in this essay.

1 The Problem

In 1999, a movie came out titled “The Matrix.” In the movie, all people’s bodies were kept in stationary pods. The people’s brains were connected to wires that fed their brains impulses. These people thought and felt that they were living their lives in a normal world but were actually being sent artificial signals. They were in stationary pods but thought they were living normal lives.

In their artificial world, they could do any sort of test, and a response designed to keep them believing they were in that real world would be given. Thus, there was no way for them to tell they were in an artificial world!

This begs the question, how do you know what is truly real?

What do you know with 100% absolute certainty?

Let’s say you’re talking with a friend. Are you sure? Are you 100% absolutely certain? Is it possible you’re dreaming? Normally, when we’re dreaming, the dream feels real, but it is not.

Could you be in one of those pods depicted by The Matrix? No? How can you be completely certain?

Let me point out another interesting thing. When you are talking with a friend, are you experiencing your friend? All of the things you are hearing are signals your ear is sending to your brain. All of the things you are seeing are impulses sent from your eye to your brain. Everything you are feeling is signals sent from your skin to your brain. The only thing you are actually experiencing is your own body! You are just assuming that it is coming from your friend!

2 The Solution

What do you actually know with 100% absolute certainty? What can you be completely sure of?

The following lists things that you know with 100% absolute certainty. You can't possibly be wrong:

1. You have experiences.
2. Whatever is having those experiences you call "me," i.e., I exist!
3. Some of those experiences you like; some you do not.
4. You want to minimize the things you do not like and maximize the things you do.

These are all things you cannot doubt. You are absolutely, 100% certain of these things!

Beyond these things, you can't be absolutely certain about almost anything. After all, although highly unlikely, you could be dreaming.

When we're first born (or more likely before), we have experiences. Some we like, and others we do not. It appears that, to varying degrees, we have some control over the experiences we have. For example, if I am cold, I can put on a sweater, and I feel better. Although I can't be completely certain of my effort or what my effort did, I am certain about the experiences I have. The truth of the matter matters little. The end result, my experience, is what is real and important to me.

Over time, I see the relationship between my effort and the resulting experience. I begin to build a model in my head that would explain this relationship. Although I have no way of knowing the real truth of the matter, I am building a model that appears to enable me to better minimize pain and maximize pleasure.

Again, although we cannot tell if it is a correct model, it is clear that it is a functional model — it enables us to minimize pain and maximize pleasure.

The model we create is of a physical world. In this model, all things are physical. This is the materialist view. Although we can never know the ultimate truth of our model, we can say that the use of the model is consistently functional. Thus, we start with what we know: experiences and ideas. We build a model that helps us understand and control these experiences. This model is completely material.

2.1 The Value of the Model

Let me tell you a story that will be helpful. Imagine a friend tells you they've invented a device that can cause you to see and feel things that don't really exist. This is a little like watching TV. They put the device on your head and tell you that when they turn it on, you will see and feel your hand burning. They assure you that nothing is really happening to you. It isn't real. You're just experiencing it.

They turn the device on, and you see and feel your hand burning. The pain is tremendous. What you would likely do is scream at them to turn the device off and get it off your head immediately! Once they do this, you see and feel that your hand is undamaged. You likely do not want to repeat the experience!

The point is that the ultimate reality of the experience is unimportant. It seems real to you, and you didn't like the experience!

2.2 Objective Reality

I appear to be able to interact with other individuals who share my model. Through this interaction, I discover that the other individuals seem to have built models of reality that are very similar to my own. We call this "objective reality." The question may arise asking why each of our individual models agrees to the degree that it does. The reason is that we are each built similarly. We each have the same senses: sight, hearing, smell, feeling, etc. To the extent that our experiences and the way in which we process these experiences are the same, we will build similar models. This is the reason that we can interact with other individuals in a common way.

What we have done is start with something certain (experiences, ideas) and build a model to help us understand and manipulate these experiences to our benefit. The things we know for certain (experiences) will only take us so far. Complete certainty in our model is not possible, but it serves us well.