

In the past few months I have been continually confronted with what is going on in my world. I have vacillated between feeling like a pawn in the game of much more powerful institutions and feeling like my future is mine to live and love. But I always circle back to the idea that everyone's ideas and points of view are slightly and sometimes significantly different from everyone else's. In other words, we all live in our own distinct realities. So I posed the question, "What do I want my reality to be?" Part of examining this question is looking at what my reality is and how I feel about it. The idea that my personal reality is my vehicle for viewing and experiencing the shared world, or the world outside of myself, has become very important to me. I have come to think of my perception of reality as stemming from within me, molded by my thoughts, the way I think, and my imagination. Therefore, when I experience something, whether it's a person, a place, or an idea, fiction or non-fiction, it becomes real to me; it becomes part of the lens that I can't help but see the world through.

I started formulating an organized opinion on what my reality is by researching the definition of "reality" itself. The Oxford English Dictionary defines reality as things that "actually exist," everything that "is or has been," whether or not it is "observable or comprehensible." Reality can also be summed up as the human faculty for reasoning, which includes our human ability to make sense of things and our systems of checking and verifying facts. These concepts led me to the thought that reality is not only an individualized experience, but it is a fragile one as well. A person's reality can be broken, or turned completely around by inexplicable truths, contradicting evidence, or even the power of belief, all of which can breed confusion in an instant.

My research continued, touching on existence, ontology and Rene Descartes. The idea that existence is more than just everything that is, but also the fact that we can sense it struck me as very true and became deeply ingrained in my thinking process. The question of whether entities outside my sensory scope are actually part of my reality was raised. There are some objects, places, and phenomena that I can perceive or imagine, but do not immediately affect or connect to me. I categorize these abstract experiences as part of my "world," but not part of my day-to-day "reality," which includes both the mundane tasks and experiences I live through regularly, as well as the amazing, wonderful and sublime once-in-a-life-time experiences that I have been a part of first hand. I can divide everything I have ever heard of or experienced in any way into these two categories: my world and my reality. My reality fits inside my world, and sometimes they overlap on certain experiences. This way of thinking helps me process information and ideas and it is my way of trying to understand the universe. Ideas that are very abstract to me, like god figures and deities, can be stored in the vault of ideas labeled 'world,' so I can try and keep them separate from aspects of my reality which I am sure are true for me. Nouns like "violence", "starvation", and "terror" are more complicated. I am immensely thankful that they are only part of my world that I live in, and not part of my immediate reality, but they are on the outer edges of my reality because I think about them often as part of the realities of other human beings whom I try to have compassion for.

What intrigued me about ontology, a major branch of metaphysical philosophy that deals with the nature of being and existence, was how thoroughly it questioned everything I had previously taken for granted. It still seems instinctual for me to assume that all people are living in a common world. But reading even preliminary definitions of ontology reinforced my personal need to question. It also captured my interest in hearing all sides of an argument and as many accounts and points of view of an event as possible. I see some of the principle questions of ontology, including "what can be said to exist?" and "what are the meanings of reality?" from

Aristotle's Categories, as valuable questions worth considering. I was inspired to answer with Rene Descartes' "I think therefore I am," meaning that the only thing that can be infallibly claimed to exist are the thoughts of the individual thinker. That person's individual reality, built on their experiences and their sense of reason, might be completely different from someone else's. In fact, other people might not even really exist, they might just be figments of the original thinker's imagination. The first time I considered this possibility I wondered what the point of being a "good" person was. I decided that even if all my actions are inconsequential in the big picture, which may or may not exist, all of my actions affect me physically, mentally, and emotionally, and therefore, being a "good" person is in my best interest when thinking about the reality I want for myself.

I see dreams as the most creative aspect of anyone's reality. Dreams are another form of truth or reality—uncontrollable, personal, alternate and fictional, but vastly important. According to an NPR interview with Natalie Angier, science writer for The New York Times and author of "In the Dreamscape of Nightmares, Clues to Why We Dream at All," seventy-five percent of dreams are nightmares, or dreams with negative emotion. Our nightmares also grow with us. They increase steadily in number from age five to age twenty-five, probably in correlation with brain development, lessening when we become middle aged. Dreams occur in REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and Non-REM sleep. Non-REM dreams mirror past experiences in short bursts of memories compressed into seconds, usually with a more positive emotional quality. REM sleep, on the other hand, is when nightmares as well as other emotional dreams occur. During sleep, especially in the REM cycle, emotions become more active. The fear center of the brain is involved in dreaming but the reason center that tells you what is true and false or possible and impossible, is much less active, which is why such creative and fantastical scenarios and events can happen in dreams and they seem very real and believable. These dreams are visual manifestations of your brain sorting through information and other stimuli collected throughout the day. In REM sleep your brain creates an alternate reality inside your consciousness where it can test out various scenarios and help you make decisions and hone skills while you are sleeping. The creative dreams of the REM cycle, including nightmares, are essential because they help us learn and they train us to survive and deal with simulated stressful situations that your mind puts you through in your dreams. As a result, you have a better chance of reacting successfully in real life. The subject matter of dreams is often very connected to what is going on in the dreamer's waking life because his dreams are an involuntary way of mentally working through issues. According to the Nova episode "What Are Dreams?" test subjects proved to be more creative and more adept at certain tasks after experiencing REM sleep than before REM sleep.

Michael Gondry's film *The Science of Sleep* explores a brief segment of the life of Stephan, a young man living in Paris who can't keep the distinction between his dreams and his reality clear, which cause problems for him at his job and in his relationships with his friends and especially his neighbor and love interest Stephanie. Stephan is endlessly creative but he has a lot of trouble functioning when his dreams take over his reality and become more important and more fascinating. I couldn't relate very much to what Stephan was going through because I don't remember my dreams quite as often and when I do, they usually relate to real events or at least follow some of the laws of nature, but I was inspired by the lack of control that Stephan desired over his life. He wanted to be happy and for his tormentors to leave him alone, and he had anxiety in his dreams which I could relate to, but he was also much more content to accept a strange situation—he lived his normal life with the same willingness that one has in their dreams.

The idea of accepting strange and erratic behavior from others and from myself as unobjectionable, as I would in a dream, is something that I think is worth striving for.

After learning about reality and dreams—more abstract concepts—I wanted to look at something that while still somewhat subjective, could help me process my ideas about reality. Freudian and Jungian psychology gave me a means to examine myself in a semi-scientific way. Most of all, though, it was very liberating. I became incredibly relieved that I am at least not outwardly crazy or suffering from neuroses that manifest in unpleasant and hindering ways. Freud's theory of the conscious and unconscious mind relates to what I learned about dreams: dreams have access to our unconscious, which makes them a unique tool for us to learn with. Also, if the collective unconscious that all people supposedly share does exist, then it might be a basic reason to believe that humans share in a collective reality. If our minds work in similar patterns, then to some extent our individual realities are built the same way and coincide, possibly on the level of Freud's "id," or the most basic drives and impulses of humanity. Our realities differ though, due to different developments of the "ego" and "superego" or the aspects of the individual that become more organized and develop critical thinking, as well as the many different forms of anxiety. Freud's theory that humanity is fueled by certain drives stemming from the unconscious makes a lot of sense to me. I have often wondered what the point of life is, and why humanity exists. To me, the point of life always seemed to be the goal of being "happy," but that didn't seem like the most basic reason for existence because a great deal of humanity is not happy. It makes more sense to me that humanity is driven by the same instinct as every other living thing: the instinct to survive, which is to say, the instinct to reproduce, and since humanity as a species is far from endangered we have intellectually evolved past that most basic instinct and are more preoccupied with materialism and the quest for happiness or enlightenment. I don't think embarking on this quest is a bad idea, and in fact I see it as far from pointless as is possible, because I plan my own life according to this theory. I also found Carl Jung's *Red Book* very fascinating because I see it as a manifestation of Jung's close relationship with the human psyche, and as part of his personal quest for ultimate happiness, contentment and enlightenment. That quest could also be defined as the death instinct, the wish to be still, satisfied, and at peace, and the nirvana principle of non-existence, nothingness, and the void, which all human lives move toward and aspire to. *The Red Book* is the product of Jung's attempt to express himself and thereby examine his place in his own world and reality. I think he had the capacity to write *The Red Book* because of all his knowledge and experience that had built up throughout his life's work, and he had to expel it. In a way it was his epiphany, or at least his catharsis. I don't have the capacity to make or do something like that yet because I don't have such a rich body of experience.

I may not have much life experience yet, but I know I want to work towards a state of complete happiness, which sounds simple or obvious, but it's all I can decide on. I feel that since I am at such an early stage of life it is not only impractical and difficult, it is essentially impossible for me to determine exactly what path my life will take. Part of this idea is based on reasoning, but my indecision is also born out of anxiety and fear of the future. For every experience that I am anticipating and excited for there is an equal amount of fear, which I try to think of as another reason I should push myself. Right now the only way I can control my reality is with my attitude and by filling my world with experiences and people that can make me interested, excited, challenged, and happy.

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