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Fantasy, Reality, and the Self

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ABSTRACT

The question of how big of a role our thoughts and fantasies play in the physical world has been a big one in philosophy for quite some time, and continues to be one of the most hotly debated topics in philosophy even today. The reality is that these two types of perception exist, and that there is a distinction between these two means of perceiving which allows us to tell them apart from one-another. The question of whether or not these aspects of reality affect one another, or just exist without any relationship between the two is one very hotly debated in philosophy. However, the current trend in philosophy and psychology seems as though it will lead us to neglect such questions.[1] I wish to warn against this trend, as neglecting the role of our thoughts and fantasies in understanding reality is a mistake, one that threatens to impoverish philosophy and psychology if permitted to take root. Next I posit a theory of what the self really is, and defend this claim. Finally, I posit a theory in of free will using the definition of the self that I have laid out earlier, and defend it against objections that arise from Libet's findings. While I will not pretend to have solved the problem of free will vs determinism once and for all, I believe that I make a worthwhile argument in defense of free will.

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1. The case studies of psychology, are an example of what makes the field unscientific, as they generalize from one human being to others. The same sort of claim can be made of philosophy, as can clearly be seen by the "existentialist" tradition. This among other reasons is why the two disciplines are counted as humanities and not the sciences.

I. THE DANGER WITH THE MODERN METHOD

There is a very important, symbiotic relationship between the world of our thoughts (the *ideal world)* and the world which we physically inhabit (the *material world.*) The two of these are of equal importance, so I want to argue, as there is a symbiotic relationship between the two that we take advantage of on a day-to-day basis. As a very simple example, we can appreciate the existence of *thought experiments* which philosophers use very often in order to prove a point, or to test whether or not a moral theory actually has the sort of implications we would want it to have. Even for practical things such as building a log cabin, we need to create some sort of blueprint within our minds in order that we may see our task done. But the fantasy itself is always necessarily based upon reality. Not only do we draw inspiration from the world in order to create our fantasies, but we are necessarily limited by the faculties of our cognition such that all our thoughts still conform to the laws of logic. That is to say, a fact (of the world) and its negation cannot simultaneously be true. The original *Star Trek* was a struggle between the Federation and the Klingon empire, a struggle which was meant to resemble the UN and the USSR at the time of the series' creation; oftentimes we see fiction as a creative outlet for those things that obsess the *Zeitgeist* of the times. Tolkien stated that he did not write "The Lord of the Rings" to allegorically represent the first world war, but literary critics now argue that he must have subconsciously drawn a lot of inspiration from it.

A study (Mar and Oatley 2009) showed that people who spend more time reading fiction tend to have a better theory of mind and more empathy towards other human beings. We can see thus, that our ability to actively imagine and experience allows us to more accurately represent or anticipate the matter of facts about the material world. As the famous quote by William Nicholson states "We read to know that we are not alone." If indeed we can understand people better if we have better-developed imaginations, then why would we try to make psychology a field that disregards the human minds' ability to imagine itself in other worlds? It seems strange to say that we should disregard the worlds of fantasy only because inquiry into phenomena of this sort cannot be studied completely scientifically. The same goes for philosophy.

In the 18th century, a similar crisis was taking root in the intellectual world: empiricism. Philosophy sought to base everything only upon that which could be scientifically proven and consequently became an impoverished art, as there were

certain questions it simply could not answer. Questions like: "How do we know that the sun will rise tomorrow?" would simply be ones to which we could find no satisfying answer. Empirically, we do not know that the sun will rise tomorrow, in fact, we could make no predictions of the future whatsoever; we could not "know" anything in the classical sense of the word "knowledge." In order to solve this problem, Kant undertook rigorous means of proving that we humans have knowledge that is not based upon empirical evidence, and is intrinsic within the human mind itself.[1] Kant's success in showing that empiricism would impoverish the discipline of philosophy started the new dominant discipline for doing philosophy: epistemology. This rise in a new means of philosophical investigation would inspire many thinkers in the ages to come; not least of which was Sigmund Freud, the father of the discipline of psychology.

Granted, Freud's ideas have lost popularity within the very discipline he created, but it seems strange that we are now discrediting that part of psychology which caused it to become a science in the first place: the theory and the study of the mind. By making psychology scientific, we are inviting into it a large number of questions that we cannot answer through it. We might be able to take MRE scans and find correlation between outside stimuli and the brains reactions and the things it does when left idle, but we cannot move beyond a theoretical means of using this resulting science to ask ourselves questions of why people do the things they do; or rather, what makes them do what they do as prior to what a scan can tell us about what they are feeling and calculating in their brains at a point in time. The fundamental questions within philosophy such as "what is a life?" would also fail to be valid forms of inquiry as we could only answer in terms of neural links that we can prove exist.[2]

I wish to warn against an approach to philosophy and psychology which leaves us without any means of investigating questions of this nature. The same sort of problems that plagued philosophy in the 17th century will begin to plague our

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1. Kant took the knowledge that "A triangle has three sides" to be an "a-priori" truth, meaning we know it to be the case without any prior experience of the world. Note that the world "triangle" is meant to be read as the actual concept it is referring to not the word. A-priori truths are thus independent of conventional language.

2. Granted, we could define a life (as relative to a human being) as a bunch of neural linkages and emotions that we can observe, but that would give us a very unsatisfying account of what it was. All means of explaining what a life is, then, would have to step away from the scientific approach, even if they seek to explain a life based upon scientific findings.

modern investigations into the world if we allow for this to happen. Furthermore, scientific inquiry is a risky foundation for any judgements about the human mind. We have seen the consequences of this sort of behavior in the past through phrenology, a very poor means of scientific inquiry that we now find ridiculous. This is the problem with science: it is often wrong, any yet we accept certain theories and build upon them at a later point in time. Then it turns out that the theory was fallacious and needs to be discarded, but we have already (in all our confidence) dome things we cannot undo based upon our scientific discovery that we later consider utterly ignorant. We humans have, apparently, a tendency to think that we've already figured everything out. Even Aristotle (who was wrong about may things) believed that he had all the answers, and that the theory of the elements was true while the atomic theory (as proposed by Democritus) was completely ridiculous. When looking back, we often wonder why people were able to hold the sorts of beliefs that they at one point did, but let us not forget that we, also, could be just as mistaken from the perspective of future generations. Let us not put so much stock in our scientific reason then, that we throw away our humanity in the process. Furthermore, not everyone has access to laboratories from which they may conduct their own studies; only a few trained professionals even have the opportunity to work with such an expensive setup. Basing our lives upon the theoretical conclusions reached by a handful of individuals does not sound like a very good idea in light of these facts.

We see, furthermore, that many have hypothesized that sciences primary function is not to yield us truths. Angela Potochnik (Potochnik 2015) for example, believes that the primary purpose of science is to generate understanding, and that idealization, though it runs contrary to what is true, sometimes helps us facilitate understanding. Our understanding is like a mastery of the concept, which can tell us not only why something is the case, but also why it isn't through careful reflection. Furthermore, she states, that often a theories success depends upon its target audience; Democritus, who was mentioned earlier, was not able to find support for his ideas at the time because his theory departed too greatly from the norm in the discourse community of the natural sciences. Though the truth of a hypothesis is not determined in a subjective manner, it is true that we subjectively pick and choose which ideas to pursue in the first place when forming inquiry. Furthermore, it seems that we are subconsciously influenced in seeing particular patterns as more salient than others based upon personal experiences

the researchers bring into the lab with them. The confirmation bias is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

Though the scientific method is designed to help us in the finding of truth, we see that we are often influenced to think of the world in certain ways not based upon reason. Consequently, the primary "reason for being" of science is not to find truth. Just as the gods and goddesses from mythology were used at one point to explain the observable phenomena in the world, so science seeks to explain them also. It appears that we humans, more so than truth, value an explanation. Anything that can answer our questions and put a damper on the confusion is valued. We can often observe that people offered two different theories that seek to answer a question of theirs will often accept the simpler of the two without considering the other for too long; for why spend too much time deciphering it? They have an answer either way. To allow science to dominate our understanding of what it means to be human then, would be a great mistake. Of the two options: science, and empathic knowledge of other human beings through fantasy, it seems as though the latter will lead to a more accurate understanding of human beings even though it may not provide us with a technical vocabulary that allows us humans to share our knowledge in a precise manner. It is thus the attainment of this precise manner that we should seek to further and investigate[3] in order to create a clearer understanding of the human life.

II. THE NATURE OF THE SELF

Though we spend our time in this material world in which we can observe things scientifically, we must also accept that we spend a great deal of time in other worlds as well. We could, for instance speak of daydreams, which allow us to live in worlds different from our own that can sometimes teach valuable lessons, or at least grant us a means of escaping from our material reality. These two means of picturing counterfactual worlds allow us to make changes to the perceived material world, and to have experiences in such worlds. Perhaps we might also picture life through the eyes of someone else in this way. Novels create such an effect to tell

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3.   It should strike the reader as strange that that we should investigate fantasy when the scientific process is flawed in its way of finding truth. But science needs not be tossed to the wayside, for as long as science can help us "understand our understanding," it remains a valid means of inquiry. Furthermore, we need not rely purely upon science as our means for investigating the mind; simple logic will often suffice.

a story, and by reading many such fictional stories, we can learn what sorts of things are in common to all us human beings. This process, is not explicit, as we do not do it consciously; through reading a narrative, we begin to feel the sorts of emotions a character must feel, and we begin to consider his thoughts. Through this process, we begin to see differences and similarities between ourselves and the character in question, which leads to an understanding of where his thoughts lie. We might suspend certain beliefs of our own while adopting beliefs that we normally would not have while picturing the world through the eyes of another person in a novel in order that we may understand their process of reasoning. In order to do so, we must also "gauge" their beliefs in order of importance.[4] In a sense, this allows us to be someone different and consider viewpoints that we usually never would because accepting them would be contrary to our own character; our ego, one might say.

Our true "self," lies therefore not in the character or ego that we foster within the material world. The collection of experiences we have in worlds of fantasy and dreams is one that we bring with ourselves to the material world. Our dreams while we are asleep have the potential to be a very different to the material world we see around ourselves. Sleep is a greatly altered state of consciousness, and as we know from altered states of consciousness, they result from us "switching" certain parts of the brain that we normally use "off." Consequently, sleep allows us to have experiences in worlds that do not contain the same laws of physics as our world, as those parts of our brains that are normally used to interpret them are suspended. This would also help explain why dreams can so rapidly change from one moment (in the dream) to another, as the brain cycles to another part to suspend and "clean" of all its use so that it may recover. (Xie, et al. 2013) But whatever world we are perceiving while we are dreaming is a world that must, logically, be consistent in virtue of itself. Here we see another important lesson that we can learn through spending time in other worlds: that there can be no contradiction within any system in order for it to be conceivable. No world can contradict its own physical laws (for otherwise they would not be the laws of this world.) It is through such experiences and the process of asking ourselves questions about them that we can rise beyond a typical understanding of our

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4.   This conclusion stems from the idea that we have certain beliefs that underlie other ones. We might, for example believe that any nice day is a nice one to go to the store and buy bread, if the underlying condition that we are well and not sick have been met. In this way, we have a "layered" set of values and beliefs in a way that often seems not so apparent to us.

world as we are able to see the "deeper" reality that underlies that of the material world which we take for granted. Vastly different or not, it can be the experiences we have within other worlds that make up the self, which sometimes overrides our ego as we realize through the greater wisdom that our self has gained in other worlds that we need to act even contrary to this ego that we have created in order to promote fairness or prevent greater calamities from taking hold.

Through our experiences in other worlds, and the lessons we have gained from them, even if we cannot remember what those experiences were, it is safe to say that we draw from such experiences in making judgments and decisions in the material world subconsciously. The burden of proof for this claim rests upon anyone who would try to reject this idea. Why? Remember that our imagination is still in some way based upon the material world. Thus, the thoughts that take up our psyche continue to influence (in some way or another) our worlds. We could call these things which take up our psychic energy the "building blocks" to our imagination. Thus, there is a symbiotic relationship between the material world, and the world of our imagination, as one affects the other, which affects itself in turn – a transitive relationship.

Imagine you are trying to build a cabinet. The most prudent way to begin would be to first design a blueprint for the work. This blueprint would have to rely on prior experience of our world in order to be conceivable. At this point, the cabinet is still a theoretical entity, but as you begin building it, it will become a true, physical object. A very easy example of how our thoughts generate the presence of objects in the material world. However, a mistake might have been made in the creation of the cabinet; something you had not considered. This mistake becomes apparent as you make it, and you now have to go back and change the cabinet after altering your perception of the material world. In order to do that, you will now once again have to create a blueprint before starting, one that is created within the new, more accurate picture of reality. This simple thought – experiment describes the relationship between the material world and the worlds of our fantasies, but more importantly, it shows the self to be like the mediators between these worlds – the gateways that allow certain ideas and concepts to travel between the two worlds as they are needed.

III. THE SELF AND FREE WILL

Of course, one of the biggest and oldest problems in philosophy remains the problem of free will: do we have it, or do we not? It is tempting to think that the worlds of fantasy can prove that we do have free will, as the ability to consider other possible worlds that impact the material world could be the very thing that proves the existence of free will. Recall however, that the worlds of our thoughts are still in some way the products of the material world that we experience also. Is the self, perhaps, then also determined? Is it, as the mediator between worlds also subject to causal determination that makes it little other than a formula that has an input and an output?

The self has the ability to draw from multiple worlds, and place our conscious minds within these worlds such that we can gather experiences within them that yield us benefits in the material world. These worlds must be consistent in virtue of themselves, but they need not necessarily be consistent in virtue of each other. We can thus imagine two distinct worlds that are incompatible with each other. Take for instance the example of the counterfactual world created by Kurt Vonnegut in his piece "Harrison Bergeron" the characters live in a word in which equality is the primary value. The citizens of this world believe in equality so much so that any form of inequality between people has been done away with. At first sight, this sounds like a nice proposition, but then as we read the story, we begin to see that disturbing things are expected of talented individuals so that they cannot make unfair use of their talents. Furthermore, we see a world completely stooped in mediocrity in which no truly praiseworthy works of art or inventions of any kind are created any longer.

The world of this story is one that we would call inconsistent with the material world which we inhabit, and it is a world that appears to us as greatly disturbing. However, someone may desire a counterfactual world in which indeed everyone is equal, but also desire the counterfactual world in which everyone is free to be creative and themselves. If these two worlds are inconsistent (as with Vonnegut's world) then it follows that this person's desires cannot both be met. And yet, oftentimes, we see individuals going about life without having considered whether or not the worlds which they desire are in fact compatible with one another. Once it becomes evident that these worlds are incompatible, these individuals will have to give up one of their worlds for the other.

In the example I have given, a person might make the decision of which world to accept based upon a value judgement that roots itself in some values that have been taught to the person that they now continue to hold intuitively; thus giving us an explanation for why they do the things they do in a way that is determined. But now let us draw our attention to the sort of situation in which a person is completely clueless as to what to do based on any theory of ethics or values they have considered up until this moment. Perhaps they have to choose between a world in which either their brother or a little girl lives (and they cannot save both.) In such a situation, the person in question might be forced to quickly make a decision that he hand' thought through for very long at all that his value-theory or moral theory would not give him an acceptable answer to. In fact, it is often said of trolley-cases that they are not entirely realistic, as we can hardly expect a person who is in a difficult situation to make the sort of decision we make in a trolley-case given the (sometimes) limited amount of time to consider which action to take. It just seems very unrealistic.

When we are completely clueless and perplexed as to what the right course of action might be, that is when the human self demonstrates that it is more than just a formula for traveling between worlds, and that it has the power to make certain decisions that we cannot truly explain. This phenomenon can be observed in many cases, in fact. Sometimes we see people making decisions for reasons that they cannot explain. Yet, they are not decisions based only upon human instinct, as they run contrary to those as well. We see this a lot when considering cases of psychological altruism or the "fight or flight" response humans gain from an adrenaline rush. If we cannot determine a reason for why people sometimes make the decisions they make then somehow there must be a driving, creative force that causes people to act the way they do when there is no variable involved that could lead us to conclude that the action was determined.

Is it really correct to say, however, that there is no variable that determines our actions in such situations? It is possible that indeed there is. As Libet's experiments show (Libet, et al. 1983) the sort of actions that we take to be products of our free will are in actuality based upon certain brain states that we were in at the time of making this decision. Though Libet's experiments have long been considered the best way to refute the idea that there is such a thing as free will, but many problems have been found with his experiments, questioning his methods (Batthyany 2009) (Dennet 2003). The problem of whether or not we have free will has been one of

the more puzzling questions in philosophy, and no proof of either position has been given as of yet. I believe, however, that the argument that free will is not to be found within our immediately observable material world is the best one.[5]

IV. DISCLAIMERS

The philosophy I have just laid out should appeal to both relativist and objectivist philosophers, as the limits of our cognition can provide (for each of us) that which we subjectively believe, while the objectivist might say that these are limits in the cognitions of every human being. The relativist may challenge that a person can believe in two incompatible worlds until realizing that they were incompatible, meaning that one has to be forfeit for the other as they would then not be "right" within their own mind. However, I believe that this could even explain many things for the relativist, as the reality may in actuality be what the subject believes in on a deeper, subconscious level that he necessarily also experiences when in another world. The ability to be wrong about beliefs about the world is then, strictly speaking, not a mistake on the part of the agents reasoning and true beliefs, but more like a miniscule "mistake" made from carelessness that the agent made when evaluating the truth conditions of the world in which they actually believe. It should thus be compatible with either school of thought. I did not wish to address which school of thought between these wins out; I wanted to leave this particular analysis open to others while positing a theory of what the self is.

It has also been suggested that people who have trouble visualizing with their mind might, according to these ideas, be somehow different from the rest of us due to their lacking the abilities to travel between different worlds, and that they in essence lack the sort of self that people who do not suffer from these disabilities do. I do not wish to maintain that this is the case; and I might say that though they lack the ability to visualize, they still maintain an ability to learn from the worlds that others have created. Furthermore, their ability to visualize about other worlds might not mean that they have no means of imagining such worlds. Perhaps they have other means of doing it than by the visual sense. This is an area that I have

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5. This is an idea that we now most often credit Immanuel Kant for inventing: the "Noumenon" drives us and our creative inspiration in a way that cannot be causally determined. I wish not to talk about this view much, however, as it isn't necessary that one believes in this particular instance of such a view in order to accept that our free will lies outside of the realm of the material world.

not inquired into very much, though I invite other people to do so should they wish to if finding their own answer to these questions should give them peace.

It is also of noteworthy importance that the time that we spend within one fantasy can seem eerily real to us while we are living in it. Our persona in this fantasy world can, by the self then be given influence from any other world. Thus there exists not only a symbiotic relationship between a world of fantasy, and one of reality, but also between the worlds of fantasy themselves. We can, certainly, also draw inspiration for our own works of fiction from the works of fiction other people created. In either case, we draw upon experiences the self (at one point) had in order to attain a more accurate picture of the world in question. It is for this reason, perhaps, that a wise individual is said to have had many lives.

V. CONCLUSIONS

We do not have enough information to make any final conclusions about whether or not we really have free will or not, however, we have a good body of evidence to suggest that we humans do not only live within the material world, but spend a lot of time in other worlds as well. From these worlds, we can draw many important lessons, and bring changes to this world. These worlds are themselves, however based upon this world, in many instances, or bear striking similarities. I wish therefore, not to posit an idealist theory, though I wish also not to posit a materialist theory. The question of which of these came first is one that I wish to leave to those people who wish to find an answer to the question. What we do know, is that people who spend more time reading works of fiction have a more accurate picture of the world; at least in so far as other human beings are concerned. I wish to extend this notion and argue that the "self" is the observer or the "thinking thing" that is the awareness that keeps record of the travels between different worlds, and the features of these different worlds, even unbeknownst to the agent on a conscious level. This self then, is what allows us to not only have a better theory of mind as a result of our travels in other worlds, but one that can also give us a more accurate picture of reality for many practical purposes that affect our material world as well. What I wish also to warn about is the trend in both philosophy and psychology to be more scientific, as by being more scientific, and based upon only those things that we can measure, we neglect to investigate the very things that might yield answers to the most fundamental questions in either

of these fields. Let us not impoverish our disciplines such that they no longer have any means to answer such questions.

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