

In Nondual Wisdom, What Is Real and What Is Unreal?

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This essay covers some of the ideas found in my book:
Living the Paradox of Enlightenment

Key point: Many people incorrectly think that illusions are “unreal.” In other words, they think that illusions don’t exist at all. But an illusion is something that exists in a deceptive way. This misunderstanding is the reason why there is so much confusion about this subject.

So in this essay, I will cover what is unreal, what is an illusion and what is real. I will also talk about why some people say that the world is relatively real and why they say that God (Source-Awareness) is Absolutely Real. So let’s jump in and see what we find.

What is unreal?

Okay, let’s cover the easiest question first: What is unreal? I like to use an example that is meant to be humorous to help you remember it. Here it is: The pink elephant in your pocket is unreal. It does not exist in any way whatsoever. Yes, of course, you are now thinking about a pink elephant in your pocket, but let’s be clear. That thought only exists in your mind. That is where you witness it. And still there is no pink elephant in your pocket. The pink elephant in your pocket is completely unreal. It’s very simple.

An illusion is something that exists in a deceptive way

As I have already mentioned, an illusion is something that exists in a misleading way; it points to a false idea. For example, throughout the day, the sun seems to travel across the sky. And yet the reality of the situation is that virtually all of the sun’s apparent motion is caused by the spinning of the earth on its axis. So the idea that the motion we see is due to the motion of the sun is false.

But just because the apparent motion of the sun is an illusion doesn’t mean we should say that this illusion is unreal. It does indeed exist; this is why we can witness it.

And here’s an important point: Many illusions are persistent. Even after we learn about the spinning of the earth, it will still seem as if the sun is moving across the sky. We won’t be able to feel the spinning of the earth with our bodies just because we figured out what is really going on. So even after we discover the true nature of the reality at hand, it will still seem like the false idea is true.

By the way, I think it is perfectly fine to speak as if the sun is moving. For example, it is okay for me to ask you if you saw the sunset yesterday, even though that implies that the sun is moving (setting). We are just speaking from the perspective of our own experience and this is valid. The communication is clear and we all know what we mean.

But notice how frequently people use the word illusion and then later reveal that they think that this illusion is something that does not exist at all.

This often happens when people talk about time. They might say something like “Time is an illusion,” and then a minute or two later, they will add “Well, since time does not exist, we shouldn’t worry about it” (or whatever). See the slip-up? That is not the correct understanding of the word “illusion.” Ordinarily I am relaxed about how people speak but for this subject, there are some important benefits in being more precise.

A similar thing happens when we talk about dreams and movies. You hear people say “Oh, thank God it wasn’t real; it was just a dream.” Or “That was just a movie; it wasn’t real.” But I think it is much better to say that it was real only as a dream or it was real only as a movie. Yes, a movie exists as a fabricated fictional story. So it exists as fiction; it is real as fiction. If the movie did not exist, we could not watch it. Likewise, a dream is certainly experientially real for the person witnessing it.

But we all know that movies and dreams are not real in the same way that our ordinary reality is real. There is a layer of fabrication, a layer of pretending. If the movie is about a murder, the real police will not show up and arrest the actor since no one was actually killed. It was just an act of pretending. And yet that act still exists as an act of pretending. So the movie can be said to exist “one level down,” so to speak. It is just an act of pretending and all the fabricated roles can be dropped at any time. These roles are nonessential to the existence of the actors and actresses. But those roles are essential to the movie, of course.

When we “buy into” the movie as we watch it or if we are asleep and dreaming without realizing it is a dream, the movie and dream trick us into believing that they are “more real” than they actually are, so to speak. Or more correctly, we do not recognize that the movie is real only as a movie, and that the dream is real only as a dream.

Notice that dreams and movies are experientially real and this is the way everything is real. All things are real as something that can be experienced. We can experience a tree and we can experience a dream. All of creation is experientially real.

God and creation - Going a little deeper

Speaking of movies, God arises as all of creation in a way that is very similar to an actor arising as a character. I use this metaphor a lot, as you will see in a minute.

I should start this section with some of my opinions, some of my definitions.

God is Source-Awareness. God is not an object or a thing and cannot be perceived in any way whatsoever. This Awareness perceives but it cannot be perceived. God has two capacities: the capacity to perceive and the capacity to create what it perceives. Hence the term Source-Awareness. And this is what you are fundamentally. *This is all you are fundamentally.*

And yet there’s more to what you are – but none of that is essential to what you are as pure Awareness. Through the miracle of creation, this formless Awareness paradoxically arises as the

form we see all around us. And this is what you are in a nonfundamental way. It seems to me that this phrase (or concept) of nonfundamental existence (or nonessential existence) has been mistranslated as “unreal” and this has led to a fair amount of confusion for a very long time.

To help us understand this point a little better, we can use the metaphor of the actor and the character. When the actor arises as the character, they are one. That’s an important point. And yet, the character is not fundamentally who the actor really is. The character is not essential to the actor since the actor can drop the role of the character at any time. Again, the actor arising as the character is very much like God arising as creation so I hope you enjoy pondering this metaphor.

Source-Awareness is real (often stated as Real) and yet it cannot be experienced. But this is what you truly are. You can know this because you are this, not because you can experience it.

All of creation is experientially real and yet all of creation is a fabrication, a construction, and nonessential to what you are as Source-Awareness. I like to say that creation exists “one level down” from the non-experiential Reality of Source-Awareness.

Source-Awareness exists as this unchanging capacity to perceive. It exists outside of time and space as the unchanging Source of time, space and everything else. This is why Source-Awareness is said to be Absolutely Real.

All of creation is ever-changing and can only be known through experience, which is a relative process that involves the observer (formless Source-Awareness), the process of observing and the object which is observed. This is why all of creation is said to be relatively real.

And yet God and creation are one Reality, not two. This is why this wisdom is said to be “nondual.”

The world can be said to be an illusion since it seems to exist all on its own. This is because the Creator is completely imperceptible. And yet if it were not for this unseen Creator permeating all of creation and giving it substance, creation would not exist. This is why you hear some Hindu teachers say that “the world as world is unreal” and yet “world as God (Brahman) is real.” If you think of the world as existing all on its own without God, you entertain a false idea. But if you think that God arises as the world, then you entertain a true idea.

Now, not only is all of creation an illusion, but the person you appear to be is also an illusion. Yes, of course, the person exists but it is not the separate, mortal, sentient, physical being that it appears to be. That is the false idea pointed to by our common daily experience. However, don’t overlook the fact that the person does indeed exist.

Here is what I like to say:

Your *fundamental identity* is Source-Awareness, the one, uncreated, formless Divine Essence. Your *nonfundamental identity* is the totality of created reality. This is what you are through the process of creation. And your *functional identity* is the person you appear to be. All of this is thoroughly divine. God is infinitely intimate with all of creation.

It is God who is arising as everyOne and it is God who is doing everything. How wondrous!

I have essays on my website that go into all of this in more detail. Here are links to two of them:

The Loving Heart of Enlightenment

A summary overview of spiritual awakening in simple, clear English

<https://infinitelymystical.com/essays/the-loving-heart-of-enlightenment.html>

3 pages

Anatta – “Not Self” Rather Than “No Self”

<https://infinitelymystical.com/essays/anatta.html>

3 pages

Take your time with this material. While it is not complicated, it is much different from the way things seem to be and it takes a while for it to sink in both cognitively and intuitively. In my opinion, it can take lifetimes for this wisdom to come alive within your soul in its deepest intuitive form. So no rush and no worries.

Thanks for reading this essay.

In truth, I honor your divine nature

All my best,

Thomas Razzeto

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