Reality

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



> “I dreamt I was a butterfly... Now I do not know whether I was a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I am a man.”

Zhuangzi

This morning I woke up and the familiar world assembled itself again. The dark room. Clothes on a chair. My body. A dog shifting in her bench, asking to be let out. Daylight slipping in under the blinds. A rooster somewhere in the distance. Routine, continuity, orientation. It all felt obvious. This is reality. This is real.

But “real” is a strange word. It does not only describe what is there. It also describes what holds. What resists doubt. What keeps returning. In that sense, reality is not just a set of objects. It is a stabilized world.

> “Spacetime is your virtual reality... The objects you see are your own invention.”

Donald D. Hoffman, The Case Against Reality

In his provocative way, Donald Hoffman suggests that what we call space, time, and objects might function like a user interface. Not a truthful picture of whatever is “out there”, but a workable display shaped by survival. The point is not that nothing exists. The point is that what appears as reality may be optimized for navigation, not for truth.

Evolution, nervous systems, and culture do not hand us a neutral world. They shape what can be noticed, what can be ignored, and what counts as a thing. A world is not given as a finished product. It is assembled.

Language then hardens the flow. It names. It separates. It turns continuity into “items”. And once the naming has taken hold, it starts to feel as if the named things were there first, waiting to be discovered.

> “We are not only spectators. We are participators.”

John Wheeler

This does not mean that reality is “imaginary”. It means that whatever reality is, it is never encountered without conditions. Measurement, perception, and interpretation are not later add-ons. They belong to the way a world becomes describable at all.

Some non-dual voices push this further and say: what you call reality is a world of appearances, and every claim about what lies behind it is also an appearance. I agree with the restraint in that move, even if the metaphysical certainty sometimes smuggles itself back in through the back door.

> “All there is, is this world of appearances… and even ‘truth’ is an appearance.”

Miranda Warren (paraphrased)

So what can we say without turning it into yet another doctrine?

We can say this: we cannot step outside experience in order to validate experience from the outside. Any model of reality, whether scientific, spiritual, or philosophical, appears within the very field it tries to explain. That does not make models useless. It makes them situated.

This is where the temptation toward “final answers” becomes suspicious. Kurt Gödel showed that sufficiently powerful formal systems contain truths that cannot be proven within the system itself. That is a result about mathematics, not a theorem about the universe. Still, it is a useful warning: closure has limits. Total justification is not always available from within.

And that includes the statements being made here.

> “There is no outside to the dream… This is it, whatever it looks and feels like.”

Nancy Neithercut, This Is It, Coyote

Reality, then, is not a final object we can confirm. It is what holds together as a world, here, under these conditions, in this life. Real enough to bruise your shin. Real enough to feed the dog. Real enough to keep returning.