

Why There is No Ultimate Reality

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Paper read at Dallas Philosophers Forum
February 12, 2008

I'm sure you are curious as to why I deny the validity of the answer to the most basic of philosophical questions throughout the perennial history of philosophy, the one which goes back to the very beginnings of Greek philosophy and is found in philosophies around the world. It would seem to be a necessary answer to the questions that everyone, not just philosophers, ask. Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? What can I know? What is real and what is truth? So we want to know what is real. We need to know what is real in order to survive. It is also connected to our need to establish some criteria for operating our lives. Not a one of us is a skeptic in our daily lives. We use such admonitions as "get real," "is he for real," "in the real world" or we are propagandized that "Coca Cola is the real thing." I like to call it the *What's It All About Alfie?* philosophy after the Michael Caine movie of the same name.

The short answer to my denial is that it is a metaphysical concept, and since the late 1900's we have put metaphysics in the trash can of antiquity. We now do ontology which originally was part of metaphysics, but specializes only in a description of being without using introspective rationalistic constructed by reason concepts with no empirical justification. Ontology is not the fantasizing of the imagination which is akin to religion positing a god as the necessary creator of the universe. In fact the term "ultimate reality" is used as a synonym for god in philosophy as well as other terms such as "ground of being," or "ultimate concern."

I have to invoke Karl Poppers admonition concerning scientific theories to philosophy and religion as well. If it cannot be disprovable then it cannot be proven either. You cannot disprove the existence of ultimate realities or creator gods, nor can you prove them. Now I am not saying there is no reality or there are no real things. What I am saying is ultimate anythings, never mind realities, are no longer viable philosophical subjects because they are made up, fantasized concepts that use meaningless and ambiguous language. In most historical metaphysical language it was always called substance, mental or physical, which language was long ago discarded for more direct empirical knowing of these phenomena.

The long answer involves my research, study and thinking for many years. I came to the conclusion that reality was not what we have always assumed it was. My understanding of this became the cornerstone of my weltanschauung, my world view. After 65 years of studying, researching, and teaching philosophy I became the child who had the innocence, or is it audacity, to say out loud that the emperor had no clothes and was naked. So tonight I will give you some idea of my thinking, the terms I use, the methodology I use, and the basic notion that became a new philosophy for me. In forty minutes or so, I can hardly give you all of the elements that go into

such a different world view. I, in fact, am going to stick strictly to the concept of what is reality and why it cannot be ultimate or absolute. The whole story requires a book, perhaps many books. But I will present my thinking on this concept and some of the consequences of such thinking.

After all is said and done, Philosophy is a process of word games which we use to communicate our thoughts and feelings to each other and critique these shared notions. It has no subject matter of its own, but is a method of inquiring about the ideas of all different fields of possible knowledge. It is a buffet of ideas from which I can pick and choose what to put on my plate and leave other items off of it. This was a definite no-no when I first started studying philosophy. It is called eclecticism and for systematic philosophies, the worst sin next to solipsism, nihilism, relativism or naïve realism. However, since we no longer do systematic philosophy, by which I mean closed systems of thought, I think it is legitimate. It is no longer an either/or or even a both/and way of philosophizing, but an all the above in some sense of each notion, even something that could be a temporal, temporary form of a stable reality. I liken it to going to the midway at the fair and having the barker or huckster call at you, “you pays your money and takes your pick.”

That is why there are so many different world views. I will boil them down to the two most basic of them that permeate the entire perennial history of philosophy until the late 1900’s. That is when we stopped attempting doing systematic philosophies which always required positing the notions of a god of some sort, or at least this concept of ultimate reality. These were necessary to round out or close the system, and usually incorporated the concept of a basic substance or two of them as metaphysical realities out of which everything that exists is made. But non-systematic philosophizing gave up such thinking just as the scientists had to give up the notion of ether when Einstein’s theory of relativity was empirically proven by some predictions that were verified.

Now I must say a few words about phenomenology as a methodology of proceeding with my analysis. I use my own version of the procedure, although Husserl, Sartre, and especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty were most influential in teaching me the basics of this form of philosophizing. Phenomenology says that philosophy is something you do, not something you believe. It is the mode of being able to communicate with each other by taking the attitude of the other, mentally or physically and thus “see what the other sees.” Husserl had maintained that you need to come to the study of phenomena without any preconceived notion, which he called “bracketing.” Later phenomenologists found that this is nearly impossible, but we can always be open for the moment, take the attitude of the other to see what he is seeing. Then you are free to reject, criticize, offer alternative notions or argue your own world view.

I use the version of phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty wherein perception is primary. He uses gestalt psychology also as the model of what a phenomenon is. It is always a figure against a background, a configuration. And this is not just in seeing, but in all the sense perceptions including the phenomena of the conscious brain we call thoughts or ideas. But perception is not just sense data on a blank tablet.

Since the days of Locke and Hume and even Husserl we have learned much about our bodily equipment and its processes in DNA, RNA, the learning processes of infants and children and the many functions of the brain that are functions of our evolution, the reptilian brain of the autonomic and automatic functions of the brain, the limbic or emotional mammalian brain which develops our emotional life, our attitudes towards others, love, feelings, nurturing and being nurtured and also deals with the subconscious functions of our neurology.

Finally there is the neo-cortex, the new kid on the block, the bully who wants to take over the neighborhood, but is constantly being taken down and overruled by the emotions. This is where we reason, use math, logic, fantasize and develop concepts from our imagination and make judgments. All of these function as consciousness. But consciousness is not a thing. Consciousness is a function of the neurological system of the brain and the body. This is another reason that I deny the existence of an “ultimate reality” especially of the type of universal minds or a universal consciousness or a logos because they connote a dualistic mind and body separation, and are a form of panpsychism where all the world is one big intelligence unconnected with a brain. It is sometimes called a world soul or world mind. But there is no empirical evidence except mythology. If there is such a thing, I would like to see the brain wherein it resides. In fact I would like someone to show me where in the brain the mind exists.

The point is that all of these types of metaphysical ideas are “made up” stories and have no validity experientially, and even sometimes have a logical validity which says nothing about a real existent thing which is experienced empirically or could be disproved. The Cartesian mind-body split is impossible and even he knew that in his skepticism he had to come back to an observed experience, and that is how the modern scientific method was given the space to develop. Next to Platonic idealism, I think the Cartesian mind-body split is one of the most detrimental fallacies concocted by western philosophy.

But what then is a thing? A thing is a system. This system is a partial description of a set of infinite descriptions of phenomena, but which when a sufficient number of them are experienced a number of times, we can name and interpret that figure against the background and call it a thing. This also applies to the phenomena we call ideas in our consciousness, they are things in the same sense. Ideas are just abstract phenomena gained from our hermeneutical analyses. They have the same reality as outside perceptions, i.e., ideas are abstractions from within the functions of the neo-cortical brain. This describes the psycho-somatic existence we call a human being.

So metaphysical speculations, introspections, dualistic theories, monistic theories are antiquated means of seeking knowledge. There is no solipsism possible because we didn't create our brains, we didn't create our language individually, we certainly didn't choose our parents, our DNA, our culture or society and the like. My point is that inter subjectivity is as natural as subjectivity. So I am saying we choose a weltanschauung, a world view, by either confirming the paradigmatic brainwashed view of our particular era, the

place, the culture we are born into or changing it to fit our needs. Most of us accept the world view that is taught by parents, teachers, clergymen, the so-called authorities. All of us, including the philosophers and scientists are in the same box and it is difficult to think outside of the box. But that's what the best philosophers and scientists do, and I am trying to do with my new world view. We have seen many examples of such breakthroughs, the Copernican Revolution, the Enlightenment, the non-systematic philosophies of the 20th century. The mind/body problem was solved simply by seeing that we are psychosomatic creatures, the mind and body are the same entity undivided.

Merleau-Ponty, as did Husserl and all the existential phenomenologists, recognized that "consciousness is nothing in-itself, but always and of necessity consciousness of something." What he purports is that because perception is the primary act of our consciousness, our subjectivity cannot exist without an objectivity, and these things have to take place somewhere. He calls this the lived world experience. Thus his and my definition of humanity is a subject/object/in the world and this also explains the structure of our behavior.

So from a perceiving consciousness of phenomena we have hermeneutically abstracted and analyzed how we are in contact with reality, whatever that turns out to be. It is neither a subjective act alone as in idealism and realism operating by reason, nor is it a materialistic strictly objective act operating solely by empiricism. Thus, this trilogy that makes up our world view embodies every experience of our noetic or mental experience as well as the noesis or physical phenomena we call objects.

This brings me to my first proposition concerning reality. It is always changing its nature as it reveals itself to us. What also changes are our environments, ways of thinking, acting, contemplating, imagining, etc., changing with new paradigms as they develop. The process of consciousness takes place in the world, our lived world experience. Philosophers have always scorned, our good old boy, "the naive realist." I myself have disparaged this common sense view of reality, and have often said the trouble with common sense is that it is so damn common. Nevertheless, is any sane person, no matter that scientists tell us that everything is made up mostly of atoms and a whole lot of empty space, going to stand in front of a moving truck because it is mostly empty space? In a way, naïve realism is our lived world experience. We perceive phenomena with our direct intentional perceptive experience.

It is only when we want to develop a better and more abstract understanding, give meanings to them, develop ideas about them, posit laws of nature, develop better languages and concepts to communicate these experiences to ourselves as well as to others, that we develop complex systems of philosophic thought. That's when we sometimes go off on tangents of metaphysical or religious systems way beyond ontological descriptions of our lived world experience. And sometimes, even scientists do the same. We want more than to just know. We want to give them meanings that we invent. Now I think that better understanding of phenomena is a very valid and good thing to

attempt to do. But the problem is what is this reality I am perceiving? Can there be an ultimate reality behind it?

My answer is no, because we cannot perceive ultimates, even if they existed. I am always amused by the pop psychologist Wayne Dyer who turned religious when the paradigm swung back to such thinking, purporting that “you will see it when you believe it.” This is just an appeal to wish-fulfillment.

I can pray, meditate, have a so-called peak experience I could call transcending or even perhaps reach a so-called transcendent state of so-called higher consciousness. I could and have taken psychedelic drugs to reach the same state, and have meditated and have even been known to pray. However, I am convinced all these experiences are self-hypnotic, wish-fulfillment, sometimes habitual subconscious events, but they are still illusions, hallucinations, delusions. In fact, the original title of this paper was “the reality delusion,” a take off of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. What I am saying is that the imagination, a valuable tool or function of consciousness that has helped humanoids reach great achievement in so many areas from the arts, dance, theatre, architecture, transportation, agriculture, electronics, space travel, atomic energy, marvels of communication of TV, computers, what have you, is the catalyst for this. Intelligence and creativity are functions of brains which are parts of bodies. There is nothing supernatural. All is natural.

And I still have to give you my conception as to what reality is. The beauty of the non-systematic phenomenological method is that one can jump in at any point. It may seem like rambling, but there is a method here. It is like painting a picture. Imagine for a moment, a universe that was never created, but always existed and will always exist. I am not talking about a solid state theory of cosmology. I am willing to accept the big bang theory temporarily until the physicists give us a new theory and a new paradigm, which they will eventually. What would be the ultimate reality of such a universe?

The pre-Socratic philosophers, the first scientists, reduced everything to earth, air, fire, water or a combination of these. But if you examine what they were doing, they were looking for a substance that was at the bottom of it all. Substance was beingness and you could assign them with many different attributes and qualities. They talked about substance as the ontological basis of beingness. They thought abstractly and used generalizations aiming at universal validity. They invented mathematics, laws of logic (Parmenides, by the way long before Aristotle), they even posited numbers as reality, Pythagoras. But this can all be categorized into two main world views, which continued on down through the whole history of philosophy until Kant, who attempted to synthesize the two into one world view but with two parts.

The two viewpoints were Parmenides’ belief that absolutes, never changing, were the things of ultimate reality, or ideas as the ultimate reality. The other was Heraclitus who believed that ultimate reality was the flow, change movement. But even Kant’s attempt to synthesize what we can know as phenomena and experience, an noumena, including god and souls and the like as unknowable but thinkable, failed in doing so once and for all. His followers, the German idealists, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, Schliermacher ignored his

synthesis and returned to a more sophisticated but still an idealism. Also, out of the Kantian critiques came pragmatists, phenomenologists, existentialists, logical positivists and analytic philosophers and the synthesis was broken once and for all. From then on, all these philosophies were non-systematic and the Cartesian body/mind split was healed.

Nevertheless, the differences of opinion concerning the known and the unknowable, the logical, the empirical, continued on but never as complete systems. So permanence and absolute perfection on the one hand and change, movement, flux on the other continued on in part in many different philosophies. We still hear them talk about absolutes or evolution or what have you, but not ultimate realities anymore. At least, the Christians when confronted with Plato's ideas realized they needed a mind, so they placed them in the mind of god. This completed the Hellenization of the Abrahamic religions.

The science of Aristotle concerning classes, species, and genera of fauna and flora was important. But he also founded Metaphysics which he called first philosophy or the basic principles of being. Thus, the type of ultimate reality he invokes was as he said, taking the ideas of Plato out of the heaven of ideas and placed them in the things themselves, much like the non-systematic philosophies I have alluded to. But he too talked of substance as well as his four causes.

Ultimate reality was still the order of the day, all the way down to Descartes and even Spinoza talking about substance in his form of pantheism. But with the new unsystematic philosophies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the notions of ultimate realities and reductionism were fading in philosophy because they no longer needed to justify a closed system of thought with such a notion. Of course you could do philosophy with or without God. And they did. There have also been some atheistic philosophers throughout the history of philosophy, not just Nietzsche and the French existentialists led by Sartre, but the Atomists like Democritus and Leucippus, Protagoras (Socrates foil), and La Mettrie, Diderot, McTaggart and others today like Daniel Dennett.

The crux of this historical recounting is that I haven't noticed any new philosophies coming forward since the 1940's. The school men remind me of the medieval period whereby they are publishing more and more about less and less. They take insignificant pronouncements of the founders of the great schools of thought and either embellish them, critique them, synthesize them, but no new ideas are coming forth. There is more new thought coming from physicists, biologists, psychologists and cosmologists than from philosophers. I personally am bored with rehash after rehash of Hume, Hegel, Heidegger, and others. One writes he meant this and another retorts, no he didn't. I can and have read these gentlemen myself and know what they said. What I want to know is, what do you think? I am attempting to tell you what I think tonight.

Before I give you my view of reality I must point out another similar idea to ultimate reality. The idea of a theory of everything, which is quite impossible since we do not know everything. This idea was picked up by theistic philosophers who got the idea from the physicists ideal of a unified field theory

which supposedly would explain everything. However, all it would explain is the four types of fields, electro-magnetism, the strong force, the weak force and gravity. There may be many other forces out there that we have not discovered yet. There is still dark matter and energy to be explained, whether expansion is eternal, the real internal nature of black holes, and dozens of other scientific problems. We still don't know the very beginning of the Big Bang, nor what was before the singularity the universe emerged from.

My philosophy has many elements from many sources. Nobody philosophizes in a vacuum. I have read a great deal of the historical philosophers original works as well as a lot of popularized scientific ideas. I got a good education from the philosophers and am indebted to them for learning how to philosophize and some really great ideas. Now I am neither a mathematician nor a scientist, but I have borrowed some ideas from them and made them and used them as inspirations for some phenomenological description and analysis.

It all started twelve years ago driving back from Austin and listening to a PBS station where the discussion was on vibrations. It may have been some new age thing. I don't recall now. But my companion asked me what I thought vibrations were and I launched into a dissertation about wave lengths, fields, from colors to water to electromagnetism, radio and television waves, ultra-violet and infra-red and microwaves, and that there were frequencies that we cannot see or hear because they are out of range of our sense perceptive capability, but could be registered by machines we built. This got me thinking: as to what is a vibration. And where do they reside? Each type needs a medium for their fields to spread, i.e., fields or waves. Some need air, some water, some glands in our body, some need skin, some electricity, some magnetism, some gravity. I realized that whatever existence was, it was definitely vibratory. Then I realized I needed an ontological premise to solve this problem.

I came to the conclusion that whether or not they ever succeeded in forming a unified field theory, vibrations are the essence of being or existence because everything that exists has them. I asked myself where would they exist before they begin to move and change and combine and allow the emergence of phenomena that synthesize into things? I also realized that thoughts are also vibratory, the result of neurons in the brain. Neurological systems work by these neurons similar to electrons and protons in atoms. They seem to emerge from nothing, but nothing comes from nothing. So I deduced that nothingness is not a vacuum, but a no-thingness, (a common term among existential-phenomenologists). Probably this is what the scientists mean when they speak of a singularity of one dimension which expands and forms our 4-dimensional universe (or 11 as the string theorists claim). Vibrations can and do cause heat when friction is applied. Perhaps the vibrational fields in nothingness collide as particles do and this heat prompted the emergence of the gasses that expanded into our universe.

I was never able to wrap my mind around a creation out of nothing. Nothing comes from nothing. The first law of thermodynamics purports that energy is neither created nor destroyed. This scientific idea fostered my idea of

a non-created but emergent universe. The second law concerning entropy has been found not to be absolute because scientists have found that new energy emerges in our universe, so we probably will never run out. In fact, entropy says not that energy is depleted, but that it loses its ability to work. Yet with new energy emerging as old energy stops working I could see that there is no reason to posit a supernatural creator or an ultimate reality to get the process going. With the latest calculations that there is enough mass in the universe to keep it expanding forever, how likely is it to burn out?

The big bang theory is not a story of creation. Many theists grabbed onto it as a creation story just as they do any scientific discovery that seems to contradict creation and adopt it to fit their mythic story. No, it is a theory of emergence and expansion. The change and movement of the forces of our universe, no more, no less. If there is no creation, is an ultimate reality still possible? Perhaps it could be merely the background from which existents emerge. But even this did not seem reasonable with a non-created universe.

Thus I needed an ontological description of existence. I decided to use the Hegelian language of being, nothing, becoming, but not his dialectic, and also some Sartrean definitions as to being and nothingness. First I came to see that there is only existence. Nothingness was only the other side of the same coin, so to speak. It was the concept of becoming, the always going to be, the never ending process of being that came to be my concept of reality. Becoming is a process and so I concluded that the reality of existence was evolution, not just Darwinian evolution, but a dynamic, organic, emergent system of ever more complex systems that are constantly changing and moving, some things very slowly over billions of years, others so quickly that they have to be measured in milliseconds of existence as in sub-atomic radio-active particles.

I want to make it clear that when I use the term process, I am not referring to Alfred Whitehead's philosophy because I reject his Platonism, his panpsychism, his rationalism and his need to use god as the catalyst to get his process going. Also, I cannot go into all the fields and concepts that were used to make my phenomenological description of reality. I do want to give you some of them to help you to understand my thinking.

As those of you who know me for awhile know that my philosophic hero has been Jean Paul Sartre. However, as the years went by and I learned more and thought more, I came to realize that I had to differ with him on some points. He is still a Cartesian, a modified Cartesian, but a Cartesian nevertheless. What I accept is his definition of being which is "Being is, Being is-in-itself, Being is what it is." This makes being necessary as to its essence, non-contingent. For human beingness he makes its essence absolute freedom as it determines itself by its choices and its essence is never completed until one dies and we can sum up a person's life.

Now, I began to see that his admonition that existence precedes essence applies to all things, not just human beingness. I have defended his philosophy numerous times to this forum over the years. However, when I began to realize this Cartesian-like split, I began to see that everything is contingent, i.e., not necessitated nor deterministic, not just human beingness, but that all Being

was contingent. I still agree with Sartre about many things, but I had to change my thinking to deal with Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, DNA, RNA and host of all the advances that science has made since the 1930's and 40's. He was stuck in the paradigm of his time. And even as he himself admitted, absolute freedom in an existent situation requires us to choose within that situation. We are not ever absolutely free. So I had to modify my thinking about becoming. That's when I saw reality as a process.

Now so many other fields of knowledge have come into play recently such as the interdisciplinary fields, for example, sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, game theory, systems analysis, symbiosis, cybernetics, emergence; and new developing fields of study such as quantum mechanics and chaos theory. I don't have the time to go into them all. And remember I am not a scientist but am using these concepts to develop my ontology. I believe that they all revolve around the concepts of systems formation. Besides emergence and evolution, which are synonymous to me, I will mention four that are directly in the forefront of this analysis.

First is holism which says that all properties of a given system (biological, chemical social, economic, mental, linguistic), cannot be determined or explained by the sum of its component parts alone. The system as a whole determines how the parts behave. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. This explains complexity and is the opposite of reductionism. Ultimates are reductionistic. Second is systems theory which is a transdisciplinary/multi-perspectual domain that seeks to derive and formulate those principles that are isomorphic to all fields of inquiry. It says that all phenomena can be viewed as a web of relationships among elements of the system. Common patterns, behaviors and properties emerge that can be understood and used to develop insights into the behavior of complex phenomena.

We shift from the parts of a system to the dynamic interrelating groups of its activities. Third is synergism, which is a part of system theory. It is interdisciplinary and explains the formation of self-organization of patterns in open systems to the increasing order or complexity of that organization.

Finally, there is Cybernetics, the study of feedback and derived concepts such as in communication. It deals with how the process information reacts to other information and change or can be changed to better accomplish the communication and control of the system.

So the long answer to why there is no ultimate reality is that the concept of "reality itself" is not that things change, move, flow. I am taking it to its logical conclusion and maintaining that reality "is itself" change, movement, flux, flow and thus it is vibratory nothingness or a becoming process. So here is my definition of reality from my unsystematic phenomenological musings: "Reality is an ever changing, emergent, systematic, evolutionary, cyclical process that is uncreated, non-teleological and is known by phenomenological perception and description and hermeneutical analysis." Quite a mouthful, there. For lack of a better term at this point, I am calling this new direction in my thinking "Total Relativism." So reality can never be seen as ultimate because it is the process of change itself.

So since there are no definite set answers, I am open to new developments as further scientific and other knowledge comes forth, but, and this is most important part of this viewpoint, we can never finish our discovery and description because reality, as I defined it, is changing all the time. So philosophy and science will continue as long as humanoid creatures such as we continue to survive on this planet.

The beauty of such a world view to me is that we are not stuck. We can now step into our own evolution and produce better social, economic, political and even biological and mental structures. This gives me hope. This view allows us to give our own meaning to our lives through our chosen projects.

We can live lives of joy and happiness and love if we choose to. I love life and love to live it. That, in a way is my ultimate reality.

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