

# On True Connotations of Reality and the Problem of Non-Being

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The problem of non-being is an ancient heritage that was bequeathed to philosophers whose way of conduct crossed with ontology, metaphysics, and language. This inquiry can be traced back to the pre-Socratics, however, it should not be thought of as some obsolete occupation and confined to antiquity, as almost every great philosopher came up with a treatise on the subject, as its resolution will have a central impact for arbitration of some long-standing controversies. I will argue that the proper solution to the problem of non-being lies in its contrast and comparison with the concepts of *non-existent* and *unreal* since the problem derives from linguistics, particularly the substitutive usage of these concepts and not assigning distinct definitions. To prove my point, first, I will analyze the problem of non-being and the concept of existence. Second, I will delve into the connotations of reality, as it needs further and detailed investigation. Lastly, I will present how these concepts impact our ethical approaches.

## Section 1: The Problem of Non-Being

How can someone think, talk and, in some cases, even represent something that does not exist? Language and imaginative capabilities of our brain throw us into a very intuitive and yet very difficult question. To probe this problem, I will present the famous Pegasus example, which was proposed by twentieth-century analytic philosophers to settle the issue on their terms. When one reads Hesiod, repeats his words about the depiction of Pegasus, and simultaneously gives it a physical body or representation in his mind. However, intuition dictates that Pegasus does not exist and it is only an imagined mythological character. Then if Pegasus does not exist, or, in other words, Pegasus is a non-being, should not we are not able to think about it, utter its name and even cannot draw its picture or erect its statue, which is all we are capable to do. In other words, do not we contradict ourselves when we propose something does not exist, and our indication of the subject proves its existence? Quine applies Russell's theory of descriptions to the problem of Pegasus by taking the derivate of the word *Pegasus* and transforming it into a predicate form which is *pegasizes*, then, he claims, "there is not something that *pegasizes*" (1948, p.27). In effect, it means to say, "I look at every element of the set of existence, and none of them *pegasizes*". I think this theory is insufficient to solve the problem as it overlooks some necessities.

I claim that the problem occurs due to the illusion that people think they can make up conceptions such as flying horses from nowhere. This is not true at all indeed because our imagination is limited by our perception. All we can do is bring different qualities, that we perceive through our perception organs, together but we cannot make up brand-new qualities. Just like we can cook different pizzas by coming up with different recipes with already given ingredients, but we cannot put an ingredient to our pizza that does not exist in the universe, or we cannot cook a pizza with ingredients that we have not perceived yet. Fundamentally, I claim that we can make up words to name concepts that we perceive but we cannot make up concepts that correspond to those words. Concepts are given to us through perception and we can only name them. In other words, particulars transcend forms and ideas. Examine my following analogy. If we would abide in a world with no colors, I will call it the transparent world, could we be able to perceive, know, think, tell, and assign names to colors? For someone living in a transparent world to say “there is not something red” would be very absurd as the name red would not correspond to anything. I will encourage my reader to imagine something that never existed before just like someone residing in the transparent world to imagine the color red.

One can object by saying that colors are phenomenal qualities, but the same logic may not be applied to other objects. Such as the emperor of the galaxy. We can perceive the concepts of emperor and galaxy separately, but we cannot perceive the whole concept. I agree that phenomenal qualities and objects are different in this respect. Then, I will offer the following example. If I say, “there is something that *eats*”, by the predicate *eats* I indicate a certain property that an individual possesses. However, without observing that quality in a particular being, I could not have an idea of the predicate *eats*, and if there would not be some individual capable of and presenting the property of eating, I could have not possibly grasped and attained the denoted meaning anyway, since there would not be the corresponding conception in the physical realm to be perceived and named at the first place. If I flip my sentence and say, “there is not something that *eats*”, then, rightly, I should be questioned on how I learned and utter a quality before observing it in a particular being. If there were no organisms that need nourishment, and thus there would not be any digestion organs such as teeth, tongue, stomach, etc., we could not have imagined or thought of the concept *eating*. In this case, digestion organs are our ingredients, and *eating* is our pizza. Without possessing ingredients, we could not have come up with the concept. Similarly, although there is no absolute ruler that controls the galaxy, we already know and experienced concepts of galaxy and emperor, therefore when we utter them

together we can sense meaning, and even envision someone who rules the entire galaxy.

If you still think that Pegasus is qualified for such a counter-example, think about if it is any different from the pizza analogy. Take Pegasus, its manifestation is a flying horse with a horn on its head. A human cannot create from the void, but he can bring parts of already present things and create an unprecedented being in his mind. Horn, horse, and wings are known to us thanks to individual examples of our physical world; hence Hesiod does not create something that does not exist, he just brings together already existing things. Hence, what Quine intended to formulate was that there is not something that is being a horse and possessing wings and possessing a horn. When we put it like that, we seem to be able to deny Pegasus' existence and still not indicate something that does not exist. It is like uttering the word *square round*. Neither can we imagine it, nor we can find an instance of it in our lives, however, we can still utter something does not present in our world, by bringing together already present two distinct concepts. The two instances differ, as we can imagine, draw, and talk about the former, whereas we can only talk and write about the latter. Therefore, we can say that the round square exists in linguistics but does not have a corresponding meaning in the physical world, however, when we heard of Pegasus, we actually imagine something particular, then the word Pegasus, unlike the word *square round* possesses a meaning that transcends mere voice or writing. Likewise, the concept of *red* would only exist in linguistics in the transparent world, whereas we can envision it in real life. To refute my claim, one should come up with a conception that is not constituted by particulars that we have perceived so far.

This, intuitively, give rise to the thought that are things simply the sum of their constituent parts or do they supersede their constituents? Furthermore, although, such a being is engineered with all those qualities, it would not be Pegasus without the mythological context in which Hesiod gave it life. Such thoughts are natural checkpoints of our inquiry. I think the mythological context is not quite related to our inquiry, as not Pegasus but "Flying Horse" could have created the same issue without any mythological context. Nevertheless, the first part of our possible objection needs a closer look. All physical entities are a combination of certain physical things which can be traced to the sub-atomic level. Hence if we would have complete knowledge of physics, each physical being can be indicated by mathematical representation of atomic particulars. Therefore, physical things are nothing but what constitutes them. When we imagine some unprecedented being in our minds, we simply retrieve already perceived things together. If this would not true, a blind, deaf, anosmic, and anesthetic man could have imagined things. However, we intuitively know that such

a man cannot imagine because he has not possessed the necessary building blocks through his perception.

If one does not agree with this proposition, then not only should he accept that concepts or ideas exist independently from particulars, and without observing or perceiving particulars, we can imagine qualities, but also, we acquire knowledge with some ability other than perception, since ideas cannot be perceived with perception organs. Thereby, Quine can say “something *pegasizes* is not” after accepting the independent nature of the predicate *pegasizes*. This can assure there is no particular Pegasus, but there is an idea of *pegasizes*. Evidently, to utter a predicate and claim no individual possesses it is to mean that there is an idea independent of an individual as Plato suggests with his theory of Forms (2004, pp. 176-181, 199-207). To claim that any quality can be indicated without its manifestation on a particular would be a counter proposition to nominalism because it follows that, for instance, an idea of a bird can exist without any particular bird, as it is no other than saying ideas of qualities can exist independent from particulars. Nevertheless, I believe that Quine has no interest in adhering to any form of realism. This means, there is something that is being a horse and possessing wings and possessing a horn in our minds, and actually, it is a physical being as I will explain in the next section.

## Section 2: Distinguishing Reality

I claim the problem is derived from the substitutive usage of the words *exist* and *real*. A careful eye can deduct that until this point we used those words interchangeably, and this is not only a wrong that philosophers commit but also a common fashion in our daily languages. When we think of those concepts through the set theory, if we accept that something is real only and only if something exists, and if something is not real only and only if it does not exist, we are talking about the very same set. To see what is, the only obligation of those who seek the truth is to observe things as they are. I will claim whatever is there exists, and whatever is not there does not exist. Thereby, the set of existence contains everything there is. In other words, nothingness is an empty set. However, reality is not a necessary condition of existence, and the former is a subset of the latter, which indicates there are unreal existents. This claim may settle the problem of non-being down as by saying Pegasus exists and it is unreal, one does not contradict himself by indicating something is not. Nevertheless, further analysis of reality is needed.

To understand the nature of the reality we can delve into the language and detect the means it is assigned for. Habitually, people tend to think that something is real if they acquire an experience or qualia through a physical event, and conversely,

they call something unreal when they understand that the experience does not rely on physical conditions. It follows everything we perceive as particulars in the space-temporal dimension is real. Then what is not real? As an example, people tend to call their dreams unreal. David G. Ritchie contributes to the subject by claiming that if dreams would be coherent and persistent, such as having the same dream every night in sequential order, we could have perceived them as real, although dreams are not physical (1892, pp. 265-266). Ritchie used this example to raise the probability of unphysical and real entities, whereas I will use the same example to prove the existence of an unreal and physical entity, which efficiently leads that the notion of what is real is what abides in the physical realm is not true. I will prove this by showing something both physical and unreal. While explaining physicalism, David Papineau says "if all physical effects are due to physical causes, then anything that has a physical effect must itself be physical" (2001, p. 7) I will continue my discourse by holding Papineau's claim. So, if something is produced, or to say, caused by a physical entity, it must be physical as well. I will claim that whatever our brain causes is a physical entity. Like force fields that are produced by physical entities, our ideas, are physical as they are a product of a physical entity, the brain. Likewise, other ideas occur in the mind such as God, angels, heaven, and hell, and notions such as sacrifice, revenge, love, and all intangible entities, dreams are a product of some neuronal activity that took place in our brains. Therefore, we found many instances people deem as unreal, yet physical and Pegasus is one of them since we give it a body on our minds thanks to our neuronal activity. Hence the vision of Pegasus in our mind during imagination or dream is a certain neural activity itself, and it has spatial-temporal qualities as our neural activity does have it as every physical entity. Therefore, Quine was wrong when he indicates Pegasus is not present in the physical realm. Yes, we do not have a winged, horned, and flying horse in our brain, but we have such a neural activity that manifests such vision, which we call Pegasus, and is completely physical. It does not matter, whether the horse is constituted by flesh or neural activity as long as we envision the same picture. This follows that ideas and thoughts are physical also. A house is as physical as the imagination of that house in my brain.

Having shown, what reality is not, namely it is not related to physicality, we need to show what it is. Which property or which deficiency of quality makes things real? As an archeologist, working in the field of reality, to dig into one more stratum, I would like to mention David Chalmers' thought experiment of the Matrix as Metaphysics. In his essay, he contemplates the existence of the external world, and he says that it does not matter whether the external world really is what we think of it, or we

are being slept by some superior beings and all we perceive is some intentionally created program. In the former case, our qualia are constituted by atoms, whereas in the latter it is constituted by ones and zeros. However, in each case, the qualia we perceive are identical, and it is what establishes our reality (2003). I believe his claim is true as the experience itself does not make one scenario more essential to the other. However, I will not agree with him on experience endows things with the honor of being our reality. Still, I think, by altering his thought experiment we can finally understand the nature of reality.

Let's assume we reside in the Matrix, in which we are being slept and all we experience is some program. However, Matrix also ensures that we experience things through physical rules and as constituted by atoms. Lastly, we have a dream last night. Matrix, the physical world, and the dream, what is their relation to being real? It is easy to say the dream is not real. What about the Matrix? I believe, although it does not affect our lives directly, we cannot say it is not real, and cannot evade constantly thinking about it once being aware of it. Does not being aware of its existence make the physical world as if a dream? The moment we learn about the Matrix resembles the moment we understand that we are having a dream. Having understood being in a dream, someone does not deem his dream that much as he knows happenings will not affect him. We would have given higher value to the Matrix since its existence transcends ours, and the physical world in which we abide. If we flip the coin, it becomes evident that experiences themselves are not our reality since we are also having experiences while having a dream yet calling them unreal. Likewise, we call something real if that thing's existence is independent of us. A cat is real because it does not need us to be, whereas Pegasus needs us to be imagined. If it gallops or flies thanks to our choices, whereas a cat can walk without our existence.

One can object to my proposition by saying that according to my description of reality, the painting of Mona Lisa should not be real, as it was created by Leonardo Da Vinci, whereas if I say the Mona Lisa is not real or less real than Leonardo, I would have gone against common sense and presented a poor treatise. I will say that Leonardo caused the painting, however, its existence does not depend on him anymore. Leonardo is dead, and the Mona Lisa is still exhibited in the Louvre. Thereby, by being independent, I mean a continuous phenomenon. I will call this property existential independence, and it is different from causal independence. Mona Lisa is existentially independent, although causally dependent.

A crucial implication of my claim is that a cat was real until we learned about the Matrix, and at the moment our revelation takes place, it became unreal as its ex-

istence is dependent on the Matrix. Similarly, Pegasus was real while we were dreaming, however, the moment we woke up, it became unreal as we saw that its existence depends on our brains. These conclusions help us to see that reality is cyclical and depends on the knowledge of the external world. Currently, we can say that whatever we perceive is real, since the most fundamental reality we know is this physical world, and we know nothing that transcends it. Actually, we can observe this phenomenon not only from thought experiments but also from everyday life. Religions claim the existence of other dimensions more fundamental to ours or the causes of our world. If one adheres, to be accurate, to an Abrahamic religion, he admits that our world is transcended by some other world, namely heaven and hell, and thus unreal. He still admits that people are real because they have a transcendental property, as Abrahamic religions dictate that humans will end up in hell or heaven.

At this point, I want to make the concept of transcendence clear, as it proves to be crucial to our discussion. We transcend Pegasus, as, without our continual existence, it will not be. The property transcendence also makes things more real even at the same reality level. As adherents of Abrahamic religions hold that the physical world is not real because it is existentially dependent on others, they will still admit that people are real because they have a transcendental property, as those religions dictate that humans will reach hell or heaven. Likewise, although our dreams are unreal, we are real, even while still dreaming since we are transcendental beings and will continue to exist when dreams came to halt. Lastly, humans are transcendental, and more real than other physical objects in the case of the Matrix, because they are also present in the Matrix itself. After this treatise on reality, we can finally present a proper definition. Reality is a property that endows beings with existential independence. Existential independence means that after something is created it is not dependent on any other being to exist. Of course, man needs water, oxygen, nutrition, and numerous things to stay alive as well as other biological organisms. Nonetheless, my point of existence is not biological, but rather an ontological one.

### **Section 3: Practical Implications and the Nozick's Experience Machine**

Having distinguished reality and existence, I want to touch on another important and related concept to our discussion, permanency. There is a clear distinction between the following two cases. Let's assume the Matrix is real indeed, at this point we can claim that by real we mean its continual existence does not depend on any other entity, and by the way of formulation, it is not only real but also transcends our world, in other words, it is more real than an apple or it makes a physical apple unreal. However, we are guaranteed that we will never wake up there, we will live our lives in the

physical world, and when we die, our perception of all existence will come to an end for us. Now, compare it with the second option, in which we are not sure what will happen when we die in the physical world, namely, we are not sure whether we will wake up in the Matrix, but still, we are aware of its existence. We accept that our world is unreal in both cases, however, in the former case it will not affect us directly. This was what Ritchie talking about a coherent and perpetual dream. If one dreams forever and is guaranteed that never will wake up from it, habitually, he deems his dream much more. In both cases, the physical world and dreams are all unreal, however, the quality of permanency changes our attitude toward them. Because since, with the permanency, our time is equaled in both dimensions, it is as if they are parallel, and the existentially dependent choice becomes relatively attractive compared to its previous positioning. Therefore, reality itself may not be enough to understand human choices without the level of permanency being considered.

Nozick, in his book *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, makes a thought experiment called *the experience machine* which is very similar to our previous scenarios. To prove that the pleasure principle is not the most fundamental guide in human ethics, he asks whether people would like to enter a machine that can create any desired experience, given that after plugged in, one will forget about the machine and live his dream life without remembering it was artificial (1974, pp.42-43). Again, if we put it right, it is the same as having Ritchie's ever-lasting dream. Although people tend to act on their desires, and, as Chalmers claims experience itself would not be different whether it is constituted by atoms, codes, or anything else, we do not like the idea of spending the rest of our lives in a machine. Because we are aware that our world transcends it, and thus it will be existentially dependent, in other words unreal. From this, we can comprehend that possessing existential independence is a more important factor than having permanent character considering our choices. Furthermore, existentially dependent things cannot be more permanent than whatever they are transcended by. Playing with a permanency level can only change our approach to some degree, and the best case is to equate the temporal level of the dependent being to which it is dependent. Therefore, while contemplating the reasons for human ethics and behavior, one needs to understand their relation, at least perceived relation by individuals, to reality, and temporal properties.

One can object by claiming that if we look from the opposite side as if we would already live in the experience machine, and someone would come and enlight us about it and offer to bring us back to real life, we would tend to refuse it. In both cases, our main motivation would be habit rather than complying with reality. However, I think it would be a delusion that since we have spent so much time in the experience



machine, although we are informed of its unreal property, we acquire numerous psychological and emotional bonds with those experiences which makes us feel as if it has some real properties. Therefore, a rational being will know that whatever he perceives will be relatively fake in the machine, and properties of reality will always be a factor in the human decision process at varying levels. However, it does not mean it is the only factor, but an important factor, as other factors may influence choices also such as habit.

### **Conclusion**

When the concept of reality is distinguished from the concept of existence, we acquire a healthier ontological outlook, which can solve the problem of non-being. Existence is simply the name of the set which includes everything. We cannot possibly say that something does not exist, because something is a part of everything. In fact, things we deem as not qualified as being part of existence, rather, are not real. Reality is a property that endows beings with existential independence. If something is existentially independent, then it is real. However, regardless of being existent, if something is dependent on a transcendental being, then it is unreal. For example, the Pegasus in our imagination is existentially dependent on us, and thus unreal, whereas an apple is existentially independent, and thus real. Permanency is a factor to change human behavior to unreal things. Although still unreal, if something is perceived as more permanent than before, it becomes more favorable for human ethics. Nevertheless, reality itself is still prioritized.

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