

THE REALITY OF ILLUSIONS

CHIRAG SANGANI



As a species, humans are a curious lot. The one defining, distinguishing feature about humans that makes them so different and so dynamic as compared to other species is their ability to think, question, wonder, investigate and hypothesize. This ability of the human brain to continuously grow has enabled man to evolve beyond mere natural selection through a combination of logic, science and imagination.

Since the beginning of time, man has asked questions. Why are we here? And what is this world around us? What is the purpose of the universe? A new twist in the conundrum gets added when man achieves the ability to think, imagine, dream and fantasize. This dream world is what we call as an “illusion”, in crude terms. And the world which we live in, the world in which we breathe, eat, shit, feel pain and eventually die, is the world we call as “reality.”

So far, so good: the problem arises, however, when a particular illusion is so powerful that it challenges the very “normal” reality that one experiences. How does one define what reality is and separate it from illusion? How do we tell the difference between the two, if at all they are any different? Many people have taken upon themselves the mantle of seeking the answers to these questions raised by people who question the veracity of the world they live in rather than actually *living*.

Inception, the critically acclaimed motion picture directed by Christopher Nolan questions the literal meaning of “reality” and our faith in it. It makes us wonder about alternate worlds that might exist and whether the world that we live in is actually the real world or just another illusion. Most importantly, it makes the very definition of the word “real” uncertain. Another motion picture to question our assumptions about the world we perceive is *The Matrix* directed by the Wachowski Brothers. As Morpheus, one of the characters in *The Matrix*, says, “What is real? How do you define real? If you’re talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, what you can taste and see then real is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.”

Consider an alternate definition of reality as depicted in *Inception*. Reality is the world which we have experienced since as far back as we can remember. Reality is the world from which we choose to go into other consciousnesses, other realities. Illusions, we call them. Dreams. The only way to identify reality is to mark it when we think we’re inside it: as in the case of the movie, through the means of a totem whose behaviour is normal only in the “real” world: in dreams, the totem defies physics.

For some, this definition is not good enough. Those who believe that the world is an

illusion put upon our blind eyes since we were not even born would say that reality is just another illusion – one that stands out because of its constant presence. At this juncture, physics and metaphysics both agree on the fact that alternate worlds, if they do exist, are as real and perilous as the one we consider ourselves as the true “real” world.

Let’s combine these two ideas to form a satisfying, well-reasoned definition of reality to ground our base upon. Whatever we perceive is through our senses of sight, smell, taste, touch and sound feeding information to our brain. In the world of dreams, this information comes from the brain itself – it generates its own stimuli. In a forced illusion, we are fed images via technology.

The little hitch with this definition is that it assumes an ethereal reality such as the physical world of *Inception* or the terror-ridden warscape of *The Matrix*. It assumes that our brain is in this dimension, which is termed as “absolute reality” and any sensory information from a world other than this absolute reality is an illusion. This may not seem a problem at the outset. After all, we are accustomed to taking this assumption for granted.

What is the universe? Adopting the scientific view, the universe is a world governed by certain laws playing out like the algorithm of a program executing into life from dull, lifeless code. We are but minor side products of this circus, trapped inside this “simulation”, as it were. We perceive things to be the way they are and think they are real just because we take it for granted: real is “just there.” Some would say reality is consistency: anything out-of-place seems extraordinary and illusory. This consistency, unfortunately, is just another characteristic of the laws that govern this universe. For all we know, we could be a simulation in the form of a program running on a computer in an alternate dimension, which is yet another simulation running on a computer, *ad infinitum*.

Richard Bach’s *Illusions*, a book about messiahs, aeroplanes and alternate dimensions, talks about the entire world being an illusion. More importantly, it says that the world is *our* illusion. The book quite forcefully impresses the message through various symbols as well as obvious preaching that we are quite at liberty to do whatever we please to in our own personal illusion. Note that “our illusion” is synonymous with “our reality”: Richard makes no distinction between reality or illusion. The two are just names for the same class of objects: worlds which we can perceive. What we choose to call what is our choice.

Illusions can be of a more subtle nature. They can be that which fills a void in an incomplete reality. Leaving all metaphysical thought aside and going by the popular notion of reality, even the same event or universe can be interpreted in different manners by different individuals. Where no object exists, the mind creates one, as is its wont. This object need not be physical. It could be an abstract idea, such as an attraction, a longing, a desire or simply a gratitude where none exists. A person one step away from suicide would see hollow friendships; the same person in a more upbeat mood would see bonds of closeness.

It would seem, then, that we are masters of crafting illusions in our own reality. And so we are. It is when the illusion breaks, when an unstoppable moment of clarity comes across us that we are broken and left truly desperate. Some of us are so blinded that we can never see this moment of clarity except through our tinted glasses that keep us safe inside the merry world we make for ourselves. And through those glasses, the moment seems dull and uninteresting at the very best, and offensive, at the very worst. It seems like a blasphemy, a crime against the reality we have constructed for ourselves and we violently react to it, reject it and fight it tooth-and-nail. We fail to recognize that we no longer control the illusion we created for ourselves – it controls

us, we are nothing without it; for, to remove the illusion after such a long dependence would be to strip ourselves bare naked to a world of sharp needles ready to prick our assumptions and make them bleed until there are none left and we are left with nothing – shameful, riddled with paradoxes and confused.

No, we would rather keep our illusions.



As the illusion gets stronger and stronger, it turns to hallucination. We see with our eyes the truth, but our mind refuses to register it. We see it, then unsee it, and then are able to recall that we did see it, but somehow weren't able recognize it. George Orwell calls this process as "doublethinking" in his book *Nineteen Eighty Four*: the wilful act of self-delusion and the forgettance of the act of self-delusion itself. Only, we learn to do it in our sub-conscious which registers the final product as its reality, and then, we are no longer in sync with the external world.

Our sub-conscious manifests itself as dreams. Dreams have always held a mystical image in all faiths due to their unreal nature; many religions would proclaim them as messages from God or our "inner soul". Partly true: dreams are the visual manifestations of our sub-conscious thoughts. They show us our desires, our regrets, or our motivations: the thoughts that drive us to do what we do with a passion or a vengeance; they show us what makes us happy, what makes us cry and above all, what makes us love. Dreams have a truly profound impact on the dreamer, since never else is the dreamer in such a close communion with his sub-conscious. The sub-conscious is pure, raw, unadulterated emotion, unsullied by pretences and finicky desires. To deny ourselves the moment of clarity, to ignore this message of reality, to continue to live in an illusion based upon what our fickle conscious mind desires is to commit a crime upon the very essence of our humanity: the illusory world of appearances then triumphs over the soul of our being.

There are those who deny their dreams, and there are those who live to dream. An illusion is what we create when what we perceive is not what we want to perceive. Not many can handle the truth. Illusions offer an excellent escape for those unable or unwilling to come to terms with reality, just as religion offers an excellent crutch for those who cannot accept a purposeless universe. Such people survive in the real world only to continue dreaming. For them, reality becomes a minor inconvenience, a chore; dreaming is their actual reality. *Inception* showed us the power of dreams; it showed us its temptations, the vast potential and infinite choice in a world which we control. Recall a scene where one of the characters, a chemist, shows the protagonist of the movie a basement full of aged, poor people who had forsaken their weary existence to dream twenty four hours a day. As the chemist's help says, "The come here to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. (laughs) Who are you to say otherwise, sir?"

Illusion becomes our escape. R. K. Narayan portrayed the desperation that can give rise to an illusion in his book *The English Teacher*. The book talks about the discovery of love, followed by its sudden loss and the pain and desolation that follow. Grief, that can make you forget any rationality and make you cling to any hope, any sliver of a chance that might alleviate your pain where no respite is available, converted the rational-minded teacher of English who disbelieved in tantriks into a person who sought communion with his departed wife's spirit. It was the dose of medicine to a dying soul that made it alive and healthy again.

At a particular stage, we stop caring. We stop differentiating between the illusion we want and the reality that exists, and just embrace what we deeply desire. Or alternatively, we become truly enlightened, as Buddha would say, we lose all desire: that is the path to ultimate happiness. Whether this world is real or an illusion no longer remains a pertinent question, we just decide to choose one world and live in it. And the world we choose defines whether we have finally come to terms with reality or we have lost ourselves in our own illusion. But this difference is only to an outsider: within, the only world that exists is the one that is inside the mind; no other possibility exists. We either become the Neo of *The Matrix*, realising the true nature of the world around us, or we become the Dom Cobb of *Inception*, no longer caring at the end whether the totem will stop spinning or not; because it doesn't matter anymore.