

Defining Reality

By Asya Yuret

Lightning-fast headlights slice through the air only inches away from my legs as I walk up and down the narrow median, stuck in between two blinding asphalt lanes on the way to nowhere. I count the slightly dead and yellowed shrubs as I pass them by, sometimes tripping, sometimes thinking, sometimes forgetting. I wonder why shrubs were chosen as the medium for divine communication.

I play with the lighter in my right hand while a pocket dictionary hangs from my left, spinning its cold silver metal between my fingers, watching its small fire struggle against the apathetic drizzle from the gray clouds above. The passing car motors sound a few pitches too high, the wind blows in the wrong direction, and my glasses slip too easily down the bridge of my nose. A certain... essence is missing from reality on this particular starless night. Or maybe that essence isn't reality at all. Maybe reality is the absence of that essence. I'm not really sure what the essence itself is, though, either. A rather large droplet lands on my head with a big plop, and the cold seeps into my scalp and spreads down my neck, the chill of the night penetrating my many layers of warmth. Maybe the essence is just my perception. Perhaps reality is always the essence... or does the essence stem from reality? The Oxford dictionary likes to define reality as "the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them." I like this definition because it attempts to mask its own weakness through comparison to something less real than the concept of reality it serves to define. It's as if the dictionary wishes to fool the reader! I plan to have greatly improved this definition by the time I get home. I miss home. I'm cold.

I crouch down beside a particularly sad looking shrub and evaluate its sensory qualities. The shrub is depressed to the point of decay, and I figure the fire won't hurt these bundle of leaves as much as it would the others. The shrub adds no comment, of course. I then take a moment to evaluate the qualities not reliably perceivable by senses, waiting for something, a feeling. It takes

less than a second for said feeling to arrive. “You’ll do,” I say aloud. I flick the lighter with my thumb a couple times and lower the small flame to the dry roots, hoping the fire will be able to spread upward into the shrub’s rain-soaked leaves. I cross my legs and watch as each scraggy branch is engulfed by the scorching heat, hungry and unforgiving by nature. The shrub is unaffected, staying perfectly in shape behind the fiery glow, not so much as twitching beneath the flames. I smile and wait patiently for what’s to come, surrounded by the buzz of the passing cars (and one unpleasantly loud truck), taunted by the water seeping through my clothes. At last a sound emerges: a sort of cough, weak and barely audible through all the noises and particles in the air. Or perhaps caused by them. I lean in, my ear closing in on the flames, burning just slightly.

“HOT!” the shrub booms, sending reverberating sound waves in all directions. The voice, despite its amplitude, seems as though it’s being held by a walking stick, wobbly arms and weak legs, unable to keep composure. “What is this *shit*?”

I assume it means everything in the near vicinity. “Your creation?” I guess (and hope). Reaching the right god on my first shrub seems unlikely.

“My what?” it asks back, incredulous. “Never mind all that... no... tell the Pharaoh to let my people go so... so that they may worship me!” it slurs.

I sigh and look down. Right god, wrong time. “Your ‘people’ left Egypt a long time ago,” I say. “It’s been, what, 3000 years? Probably more?”

A hiccup follows. “I don’t know... That’s hard to believe. You sure?”

I pull my knees up to my chest, watching the glow of the moon rise higher into the sky behind the clouds, bathing the roads and the road-dwellers in a soft blue haze.

“God?” I whisper.

“Yes?”

A moment of silence. “Have you been drinking?”

The flames dance up and down in a fiery (literally) rage. “Yes.” God answers. “Anything else?”

Fascinating. I didn’t think the world had gotten so bad that even a god has to drown his sorrows. C’est la vie.

I reply “Yes,” pull out my pocket dictionary and flip to the orange-tab-marked page. “Can you define reality?”

A pause. “What gives you the impression that I can?”

“Well, you’re often associated with the concept of omniscience. So I thought you’d be a good place to start my research.”

“Omniscience, eh? I suppose I do know quite a lot...yes...but not everything, surely.”

I close the pocket dictionary and stare pointedly at the dancing flames. “But, that... that’s precisely the definition of the word omniscience.”

“What does the dictionary say?” God asks, limbs of flame poking at the small book in my hands. I open up the ‘O’ words and scan through, running my index finger over the yellowed pages.

“It says ‘the state of knowing everything.’”

“How about the definition of everything?”

I flip to the E words and repeat.

“‘All things.’”

I flip to the T words and sigh when I see that the definition of ‘thing’ is nearly half the dictionary.

“Not going anywhere, is it?” asks God.

“No. But all this is besides the point. I’m here to learn about reality, not linguistic flaws. This poor bush has been sacrificed in the name of defining reality, God. Can’t you see? Don’t you care about the bush?”

“Alright, alright. Calm down. The bush is fine.” The voice has become a deep bass, heard not only through ears but by a vibration in one’s core. “Reality is... a very large concept.”

I nod. God continues: “How about we start with what reality isn’t, then?”

“What it *isn’t*?”

“Precisely. What reality isn’t is surely more digestible than what reality is.”

I turn toward the road, emptier now than it was before. What isn’t reality? The question seems to lead nowhere.

“My thoughts?” I guess.

“Are your thoughts not real?”

“Well... no, that doesn’t sound right. ‘I think therefore I am,’ right? They must be real if they prove my existence.”

“So... thoughts create reality?”

“Huh. I like the sound of that. I think so.”

“Great, then! You shouldn’t need my help finding a definition if your mind transcends reality.”

“Exactl- wait, what? I never said my mind *transcends* anything.”

“But you said thoughts create reality.”

“Well... thoughts have to come from somewhere. And if thoughts are real... then they must come from something real.”

“So reality stretches beyond thoughts?”

“Yes... yes. But... my own reality is made up of my own thoughts. They’re equal.”

“So everyone has a different reality?”

“I suppose so.”

“How are we supposed to define such a thing, then? If it’s different for everyone, reality must have close to infinitely many definitions.”

The flames weaken as the rain strengthens. Drops of water slide down my forehead into the crevices of my nose and lips.

“Well, there must be an objective reality...” I say, shivering, “one that everyone’s own reality stems from. A source. We can’t create something out of nothing, right? Just like thoughts. The dictionary definition fits this whole ‘source’ idea well, I think: ‘the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.’ The use of ‘actually’ is probably where I’m getting the objectivity from, and that’s paired with the subjective ‘idealistic’ or ‘notional.’ But I quite hate everything else about the definition.”

God ponders a moment. “Rightfully so. What an *abomination*. It’s as if it’s trying to mask its own weakness through comparison to something less real than the concept it serves to define.”

I turn sharply toward the bush, laughing. “My thoughts exactly!”

“Hah! Then perhaps it is that we share a reality!”

“Well, that would make sense, considering I’m part of you.”

“Wait, part of me?” God says. “What does that mean?”

“Well, you created me. And everything else. You created reality itself. That’s why I’m bothering you about this,” I say, waving the dictionary in the air.

“That’s very flattering...” God replies, “but I’m afraid you’re mistaken. Actually, I’ve never heard anything more ridiculous except for maybe that definition from your little book. How do you know you haven’t created me?”

“That’s impossible,” I say. “You can’t create something... bigger than yourself. For lack of a better term.” My brain seems to soak in the rain, becoming drowsy and stiff, diluting my thoughts.

God is silent for a moment. “There’s a lot of things wrong with your statement... but we don’t have much time for tangents in this weather. Didn’t you say earlier that I created reality?”

“...Yes.”

“Am I real?”

“I don’t know. Are you?”

“Well I’m either real or not real, correct?”

“I suppose.”

“In both cases, reality exceeds me.”

I frown. God continues. "In both cases, reality is the category in which I'm being defined. I either exist within reality, or I don't. Correct?"

"I think so."

"Well, wouldn't you say in this case that reality is bigger than I am?"

"... Perhaps."

"So, according to your previous statement, that would mean there is no way I could have created reality."

"Fair enough."

"And seeing as both of us are slaves to this devious concept, do you think it's really possible for us to define it?"

"Well... when you put it like that... It seems words themselves are also slaves to reality. And you can't create new information if you define something using the substance of the same thing. You'll never get the full picture. Right? You can't rearrange the ingredients in a soup and expect to explain what that soup is."

The flames dance delightedly. "Very logical."

"So... a definition of reality within reality will never define reality itself."

"And seeing as we can't escape reality in our current state..."

"Definitions will never be sufficient. The definition of reality isn't real. It can't be. It's beyond our grasp because it's beyond reality itself."

I hug my legs tighter as the rainwater soaks my coat and pants, somehow reaching my toes through my socks and my hands through my sleeves. The wind blows harder now, still in the wrong direction.

"You don't seem very comfortable," says God. "Or satisfied."

"I'm not." I say, and sigh. There are no cars, no trucks, no people. Only the reflection of the night sky on the wet asphalt remains, punctuated by cricket songs. "This is all, just....I don't know," I say, letting my fleeting hopes of an adequate definition melt into disappointment. "I just can't believe it. I can't even believe in *you*, God."

"And I can't believe in you *humans*," God says, a cork popping in the background of its fading voice. "Such a peculiar species."

And the last of the flames are engulfed in a cloud of hot steam.