

Haloed Flame

Kutay Kurt

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1. Doubt

Our mind craves certainty; reality, however, offers us only probabilities.

From the first moment we exist in this world, we want to make sense of it. We try to define, classify, and pour everything we see around us into the molds of our logic.

Because the unknown is frightening. It is far easier to assume something is known than to accept the unknown. But behind this ease lies a deep and unsettling truth: we are not entirely certain of anything.

The history of humanity is nothing more than a constantly shifting landscape of knowledge. We once believed the world was flat; we thought the sky was a great dome filled with stars. This knowledge was certain, indisputable. Until we saw reality in a different way. When Galileo turned his telescope to the heavens, he upended humanity's perception of reality. The sky was no longer a dome; space was an infinite void. Knowledge was shaken to its foundations. But even this tremor did not bring an end to certainty. New "certainties" were produced, and each was demolished in turn. The historian of science Thomas Kuhn called this a "scientific revolution": knowledge could never remain static; it always existed on the brink of the next revolution.

But the problem was not only with scientific knowledge. Human existence itself was in doubt. The Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi tells a story: "One night, I dreamed I was a butterfly. I was a flying, happy butterfly. Then I woke up. And now I ask: Was I a man who dreamed he was a butterfly, or am I now a butterfly, dreaming that I am a man?"

This seemingly simple story pushes us to question the reality of our existence. If we go a little further, we might begin to think that this entire life we are living is merely an illusion. Take the brain in a vat thought experiment, for example. What if our brain is an organ sitting in a jar, fed by electrical signals from the outside? In that case, every moment we live, every face we see, every sound we hear, could be simulated in a laboratory. In such a situation, nothing we see, touch, or feel is real. This thought demolishes the mind's quest for certainty.

Thus, the way we perceive reality through our senses, our reason, and our memory can always be deceptive. Why? Because the mind thinks only within its own limits, and these limits are extremely small when compared to the true scale of the universe. This is why certainty is merely a mental comfort. We live our lives believing the world created by our mind is real. But perhaps there is no such thing as reality. Perhaps everything is merely a "probability" in the midst of infinite possibilities.

At this point, the limits of knowledge become the limits of reality. As the things we know diminish, only a single truth remains: everything is as if it were a fog. Now, it is time to step into this fog without fear.

2. Halos

This fog softens sharp edges and renders precise distances meaningless. Everything around us, absolutely everything, is haloed. Every step we take within this uncertainty brings us closer to a more fundamental question about the nature of reality: Is what we think we see truly reality itself?

To understand this game, we must first recognize the walls that we mentioned are built around our minds. Plato described this thousands of years ago. Let us imagine prisoners chained in a cave their entire lives, facing a wall. They watch the shadows of objects passing in front of a fire behind them, cast upon the wall. For them, reality consists of these two-dimensional, flickering shadows. They know nothing else; they cannot even imagine it.

If one of them were to break his chains and leave the cave, the brightness of the sun would at first dazzle his eyes, and the vibrancy of the objects would astound him. The new world he sees is so dizzying that he understands the shadows in the cave were mere reflections. When he returns to tell the others in the cave about this extraordinary state, none of them believe him; because their reality is now one thing, and the reality of the one who broke the chains is something else entirely.

We, too, may never be able to leave our own cave. Because we are beings born inside the cave, who have seen no reality other than the shadows on the walls. Even if we were to see the real world, we are not certain we could understand it. Perhaps the mind draws its own limits to protect us and does not allow us to transcend them.

Once this doubt enters the mind, nothing can ever be the same again. René Descartes took this doubt to its deepest level, to the very center of his own existence. Right now, you are certain that you are reading this text, of the hardness of the chair you are sitting on, of the brightness of the light in the room. But what if it is all a dream? You have surely had a dream so realistic at least once in your life that, upon waking, it took a few seconds to adjust to the real world. While inside the dream, we do not realize it is a dream.

So, how can we prove that our current state of "wakefulness" is not also a long and coherent dream? We cannot. Any attempt at proof could be part of the dream. In that case, there is nothing we know for certain; we only pursue what is probable.

Let us take another sip from this sea of infinite possibilities; again, Descartes, years ago, left us with a possibility just as intriguing as these: What if there is a malevolent "demon" of infinite talent who designed our existence?

This being could be teaching us even the most fundamental rules of mathematics incorrectly. Perhaps $2+2$ actually equals 5, but this demon has so powerfully ingrained the idea of "4" into our minds that we cannot even think otherwise.

The colors we see, the sounds we hear, our very manner of reasoning and more—all could be puppets of this deceptive entity. If even our logic is designed by another, what is the way out of the prison we are in?

In the modern era, these questions have been revived by the brain in a vat experiment we briefly discussed. What if your brain is in a jar, stimulated by electrical signals to perceive a false world as real? Could you realize that everything you experience—your family, your memories, your current thoughts and feelings—is all part of a simulation? More importantly, if you can never access the world outside the vat, is it possible to prove that the external world is real? The very existence of the external world loses all certainty. In this case, all your experiences are merely neural fluctuations created in your brain.

The simulation possibility takes this existential doubt a step further. Perhaps the place we call the world is nothing but a flawless computer program created by a much more advanced intelligence. In an artificial universe where every detail is coded and every coincidence is predetermined, we feel free and real—but what if our entire life is just a simulation being watched by another consciousness? As argued by Nick Bostrom of Oxford University, a sufficiently advanced civilization could simulate countless universes to observe its past or its possibilities.

In this case, every pain we feel, every joy, all the memories we have accumulated from childhood to the present day, could all be a line of code, a string of data. Furthermore, we have no means of looking outside this universe, or even of questioning the system itself—because the act of questioning is also limited by the codes of this simulation. Thus, when we have no door to external reality, even the word "reality" loses its meaning. We are trapped within a consciousness that cannot step outside its own world, that cannot see its own limits, and sometimes, even asking the deepest questions can be part of an illusion presented to us by someone else.

Perhaps the problem is not a deception, but simply a limitation; yet we cannot know for sure what the problem even is. Imagine a square living on a two-dimensional plane. Its world consists only of the directions forward-backward and right-left. It has no concepts of "up" or "down." Now, imagine a three-dimensional sphere passing through its plane. The square would first see a small point, then this point would grow into a circle, reach its maximum size, then shrink back to a point and disappear.

How would this two-dimensional being explain this event? Perhaps it would develop a theory called the "law of mysterious circles that suddenly appear and then disappear." This theory would be coherent within its own world, but it would never grasp the full truth—the third dimension.

Perhaps we, too, are prisoners of a three-dimensional world, constantly being shaped by higher dimensions but unable to perceive it. Understanding what we call reality is as meaningless as trying to understand a being of infinite dimensions. In such a case, reality would remain forever incomprehensible.

All these thought experiments emphasize that reality can never be fully known. The mind is a map folded onto itself and cannot step outside to look at itself. A consciousness living inside

a simulation can never fully see the boundaries of the simulation. Just as the prisoners in the cave must content themselves with shadows, or a two-dimensional being can never understand the touch of a third dimension. We, too, no matter how hard we strive to reach beyond our own existence to the full nature of the universe or reality, only crash against the walls of our own perception, our comprehension, and even our existence.

All knowledge is but a hypothesis circulating within these walls. So, is reality truly unknowable, is there no way out? If reality is not a solid rock, but a cloud of fog shifting from shape to shape, perhaps the real issue is not to wait hopelessly for this cloud to disperse, but to be able to look at the sky.

3. The Call of the Sky

From the very first moment it opened its eyes to the ancient fog of existence, humanity's fate was sealed by a single gesture: lifting its head upward. This is a reflex older than consciousness, etched into the very bones. From our ancestors watching a storm from the mouth of their cave to the modern human gazing out at a starless night from a skyscraper window, the gesture has never changed. When crushed under the overwhelming weight of the unknown, when the meaninglessness of existence opens up like an abyss at its feet, humanity has always looked to the same place: the sky. It sought an escape, an order, a consolation. Perhaps this is the legacy of *Homo erectus*, who, by standing on two feet, saw the horizon and the heavens more clearly.

In the dawn of history, this search transformed into epics and myths. In Mesopotamia, the builders of humanity's first cities carved the heavens onto clay tablets. In the *Enuma Elish* epic, the god Marduk's victory over Tiamat, the dragon of chaos, to create the heavens and the earth, was the triumph of a divine order over chaos. Every star, every planet in the sky was a reflection of the gods' will, and the tablets of fate were inscribed there. For them, the sky was a colossal text of prophecy that had to be read. In Egypt, the Sun God Ra, who revived life with every flood of the Nile, would journey across the body of the sky goddess Nut each day, battling the monsters of the underworld in the darkness of night only to be reborn in the morning. This was a daily ritual of hope and resurrection.

In the icy lands of the North, the Vikings looked to the Bifröst, the rainbow bridge that connected Midgard (the realm of humans) to Asgard (the realm of the gods). That bridge was a shimmering passage from the mortal world to the divine; a symbol of both hope and a fragility that could shatter at any moment. And for the Turks, who gazed at the sky from horseback in the middle of the steppes, the Sky God, Tengri, was the beginning and end of all things. The voice of Bilge Khagan reaches us from a thousand years away in the Orkhon Inscriptions: "As long as the blue sky above does not collapse, and the dark earth below is not pierced, who can destroy your state and your laws?" This unshakable belief that they would exist as long as the sky did not fall is the clearest proof that they saw the heavens as a protector, a father, and the guarantor of an unshakable order. Shamans, entering a trance to the rhythm of their drums, would send their souls on a journey through the layers of the sky,

trying to bring back lost knowledge and healing. The sky was not just a place to be looked at, but a place one could travel to, a place whose secrets could be stolen.

Then the veil of the sky was torn, and the transcendent power of monotheistic religions took the stage. The sky was no longer the playground of the gods, but a pulpit from which the one and absolute spoke, sending down his commands. Moses received the tablets written by His voice amidst the clouds on the peak of Mount Sinai. Jesus ascended to the sky to return to his Father's side. Muhammad, in one night during the Mi'raj, traversed the seven layers of heaven and came into the presence of the creator. All of these narratives declared that the final and unshakeable answer to humanity's most fundamental questions ("Where did we come from? Where are we going? What is the meaning of all this?") came from "above." The sky was the source of divine law, salvation, and absolute truth. This was a tremendous bridge that, for a time, soothed humanity, offering it a moral and purposeful compass.

But beyond every bridge lies a new void, and within every answer, a new question sprouts. Philosophy begins at the very point where we realize just how shaky the foundations of this bridge truly are.

What if that "savior" voice we seek, even if it were truly heard, could never bring absolute certainty? What if, as in the Allegory of the Cave, everything we see in the sky—the stars, the miracles, even God himself—is nothing but shadows projected on the wall of the cave? What if the truth lies beyond the sky, in a place we cannot perceive?

We find this doubt in its most refined form in Immanuel Kant, who directs our minds not to an external deceiver, but to its own architecture. According to Kant, we can never experience the world "as it is" (*noumenon*); we can only perceive it as it is filtered through the innate categories of our mind (such as time, space, and causality)—the *phenomenon*. It is as if we are forced to look at the world through colored glasses that are impossible to remove. Every event is what our "glasses" show us. And what of the reality behind the glasses, the noumenal "God"? We can never know it. There is no way to confirm whether the true nature of that being corresponds to the interpretation our mind presents to us. The prison itself is the very structure of our own reason.

This brings us to a more fundamental problem concerning the nature of proof and justification, to one of the most relentless traps of epistemology: Agrippa's (or Münchhausen's) Trilemma. This trilemma states that any attempt to definitively prove a claim will inevitably lead to one of three dead ends: We either fall into an infinite regress (we try to prove A with B, B with C, C with D, and this chain of proof extends to infinity); or we engage in circular reasoning (we prove A with B, and then prove B with A); or at some point, we arbitrarily stop and accept a dogmatic assumption as a foundation ("It is so, because it is so!").

Now, imagine God descending from the sky and declaring, "I exist!" How would He prove this claim? If He performed a miracle, we would ask, "What proves this miracle is divine?" and the infinite regress would begin. If He said, "I exist because I am the cause of everything," this is a circular definition. Finally, if He said, "My existence is an unquestionable axiom; you must have faith in it," this would be a dogmatic assumption.

Thus, this inescapable trap of logic shows us that absolute certainty, by its very nature, is not something that can be proven; it always relies on the unquestioning acceptance of a starting point.

Science brought this philosophical doubt into the laboratory. The “God Helmet” experiment by Canadian neuroscientist Michael Persinger aimed to create mystical experiences—a “sensed presence” or a feeling of union with God—in subjects by applying specific magnetic fields to their temporal lobes. Although the results are controversial, the question it poses is staggering: is the spiritual experience we deem most sacred a divine contact, or an electrical storm in our brain?

Similarly, controlled experiments with psychedelic substances like psilocybin (the active compound in magic mushrooms) show that people can have profound mystical experiences, undergoing “ego death” and feeling at one with the universe, transcending time and space. For the person having this experience, it is absolute truth. But for a scientist observing from the outside, it is a temporary change in brain chemistry. Which one is real? There is no ultimate bridge to unite these two perspectives.

It is at this exact point that we confront the great wall that millennia of searching have led to: Certainty is, in principle, impossible. Because the problem is not a lack of proof, but that the very mind interpreting the proof is itself suspect. Our senses deceive us (optical illusions), our memory is unreliable (false memories), our logic is pregnant with paradoxes. The human mind is a machine that seeks patterns in chaos; that is why we see faces in the clouds and constellations in the stars. This is a cognitive bias known as Apophenia.

This is why all religions and mystical teachings ultimately arrive at the same place: Faith. Because if certainty were possible, if there were proof, there would be no need for faith. Faith is a leap that begins where proof ends; it is a bridge thrown over the ocean of the unknown, one with no logical foundations but which keeps a person standing.

So, if an infinite unknown lies behind everything, if the sky too is completely covered in fog, what is one to do?

In Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he recounts the story of Sisyphus from Greek mythology, who was condemned by the gods to a meaningless punishment. Every day, Sisyphus must push a rock to the top of a hill, only to watch it roll back down again the moment it reaches the summit. A meaningless, hopeless cycle.

We, too, are that Sisyphus. Every glance we cast toward the sky is another push of that rock up the hill. Every prayer, every philosophical inquiry, every scientific experiment is an effort to move that rock one more inch upward. We know that when the rock reaches the summit, it will fall again; every answer will beget a new question, every enlightenment will create a new shadow. Perhaps there is nothing we can do. Certainty will never arrive. The sky will forever remain silent.

4. Flame

The eyes, weary of looking to the sky, finally lower to the ground. But here, they are met with an even greater horror. We remember that the fog is not only above. The fog has enveloped all sides, every direction, every atom of existence. The ground beneath our feet offers no firmer guarantee than the one promised by the sky.

The world below is just as treacherous. This earth we walk upon, this solidity that seems to us an unshakable reality—what is it, truly? Geology tells us that it is a thin, fragile crust floating on a fiery chaos at the heart of the planet. And history whispers to us that every layer of this crust is a graveyard of forgotten empires, languages buried in silence, and bones turned to dust. Every path we walk is built upon the dreams and the wreckage of those who came before us. This ground we trust can be split by an earthquake at any moment, melted by a volcano, or covered over by the next page of history. There is no certainty below, either; only a temporary equilibrium, a postponed chaos.

Within is where the fog is densest. When we turn our gaze inward, we realize that the walls of that fortress we call “I” are also made of sand. Every cell that constitutes this body is completely renewed every seven years. Today we laugh at what angered us yesterday; today we reject the idea we worshipped yesterday. Memory, that guide we thought most reliable, rewrites events, fills in the gaps, and constructs false narratives to comfort us. Like the Ship of Theseus, as each of our parts is replaced over time, is the “I” that remains still the same “I”? On that ghost ship of consciousness, who is this being, swaying between the memories of the past and the anxieties of the future? Our knowledge of ourselves is no more reliable than a story told to us by someone else. The closest unknown is our own mind.

And what is across from us is a labyrinth of mirrors. We turn to the people we love, to our friends, to our family. We search for meaning, for confirmation, in their eyes. But what they offer us is also a mask, filtered through their own minds. Their inner world, their pain, their deepest fears, are forever closed to us. We see only their phenomenon, their outward-facing expression; their noumenal essence is a land forever unreachable to us. Perhaps they are not real, either. Even the most intimate conversations are nothing more than two clouds of fog brushing against each other. The phrase “I understand you” is perhaps humanity’s greatest and most well-intentioned lie. Because to understand is to be able to enter the other’s fog; yet we are lost even in our own.

Now, every direction is a dead end. Above, a silent sky; below, a trembling ground; within, a foreign self; across, an unreachable other. This is a state of total siege; an existential vertigo, that moment of absolute lostness where there is no direction left to take shelter. There is not even an ‘up’ to take refuge in anymore. The moment when a human being is left in the very center of the universe—rootless, directionless, and utterly alone.

And it is precisely from the wreckage of this absolute despair that hope is born.

Because if nothing is certain, if the ground can slip at any moment, if there is no fixed “I,” and if there is no absolute rule imposed upon us by the universe, then this also means:

Everything is possible.

Camus says that Sisyphus’s tragedy is his awareness of his condition. But his triumph lies precisely here. As he descends from the peak, aware of his fate, Sisyphus, who owns his suffering, is stronger than the gods. He rebels against meaninglessness. Each push of the rock is a rebellion against the absurd.

We, too, are that Sisyphus. Every glance we cast toward the sky is another push of that rock up the hill. Every prayer, every philosophical inquiry, every scientific experiment is an effort to move that rock one more inch upward. We know that when it reaches the summit, it will fall again; every answer will beget a new question, every enlightenment will create a new shadow. But we also know this now: the real triumph is not at the summit, but in the ascent itself.

This is not a condemnation, but a declaration of the most radical freedom. We realize that we no longer need to reach an absolute truth. We realize; the fog that stretches before us is not a prison, but a blank canvas upon which anything can be drawn.

If the universe gives us no meaning, then we are free to create our own.

If the ground is not solid, then we can forge our own path with our own steps.

If there is no fixed “I,” then we can reinvent the person we want to be, every single day.

This is a moment of discovery. The fog, instead of obstructing our view, allows us to turn our attention to something else, to the compass within us: Courage. The courage to take a step into the unknown. The courage to love without proof. The courage to trust without guarantee. The courage to ask questions knowing there is no final answer. As Rilke said, “I have no proof for living; I live.” This is hope: the act of living itself in the absence of proof.

This is no longer about “living no matter the circumstances.” This is about living “precisely because the circumstances are as they are.” Because uncertainty is the raw material of creativity. Because finitude makes the moment precious. And because meaninglessness is the greatest gift we have been given to create our own meaning.

Thus, man learns a new stance within the fog. He no longer searches for an exit in a panic. He stops, takes a deep breath, and feels the coolness of the fog on his skin. This unknown is no longer an enemy to be feared, but a playground in which to move, to shape. He no longer waits for a sign in the sky; he lights his own flame and advances as far as that small, flickering light allows.

This flame may not be enough to illuminate the universe, but it is enough to see the next step; and that is all we need.

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