

International Philosophy Olympiad 2026

IPO Essay Topic 4:

“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.”

Most people are blind to the suffering caused by their own actions. Even I am. We harm and hurt other individuals without even noticing it. You probably caused suffering today without the active intent to do so. We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.

At first sight the quote appears to belong to the domain of epistemology and concerns the classical problem of how we can make objective statements about the outside world, while only accessing it through our subjective experience. Yet on closer inspection, it conceals a philosophical tension that rewards careful examination. I shall argue that finding reality is not only the task of the epistemologist, but our moral duty as the human species.

The essay proceeds as follows. I begin by analyzing the concepts of "Reality" and "The Great Task in Life". I then advance two arguments in favor of my position, consider the most serious objection to my position and I will show why it doesn't succeed and conclude by drawing out what I take as the broader significance of the underlying question.

Before an argument can be made, the key concepts must be examined with care. The concept of "Reality" is susceptible to at least two importantly different interpretations. At first reading, "Reality" refers to physical and external reality in the scientific sense the world as it exists independently of our perception. The second reading and the one the quote intends is moral reality, meaning the world as it actually is, undistorted by ego, wishful thinking, and self-protective illusion. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between reality as an objective external fact, which concerns a state of the world that exists independently of any observer, and reality as a moral orientation, which concerns how a conscious agent perceives and relates to the world around them in particular, to other people.

The first interpretation rests on a presupposition. Namely that there is an external reality that can be ultimately and completely found. This extreme presupposition is far from self-evident. Therefore the second interpretation is used in further examination.

Moreover, reality in this sense has a further important property. it is a process and not a destination. Reality is not a place one arrives at, but a direction one orients toward. illusions are comfortable and self-confirming, while reality tends to surprise and disturb. When something challenges my assumptions and unsettles my worldview, that friction is often the signal of genuine reality. This connects directly to the moral dimension of the argument that follows.

The term "The Great Task in Life" is also susceptible to at least two importantly different types of interpretation. At first reading it means a form of Achievement and Accomplishment in life, while the second means a form of Telos. It is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between the concept of finding reality as an achievement, which concerns a goal that is achievable and therefore a process that can be finished, and "finding reality" as the Telos of the human species, which concerns a form of structural orientation of a conscious agent. This form of structural orientation is constituted by a constant process of self-reflection and the pursuit of finding reality through described self-reflection. Moreover, the first interpretation rests on the same presupposition identified above. Therefore, the second interpretation is used in further examination.

With these clarifications in place, I turn to the first argument in support of my position.

My first argument is that we are hurting other people unconsciously, because our world of illusion doesn't align with the realities of other individuals. This is due to two influences affecting our perception of the world. On one hand there is the fact that all of our experience is subjective. This is

just the nature of how we access the outside world. On the other hand, more importantly, there is how we process the data provided by our senses. The reason for unconsciously causing suffering without evil intent is our subconscious and egocentric way of perceiving the world. A thought experiment makes this vivid. For the sake of argumentation let's pretend the following scenario:

"You and your Partner are trying for a child. Yet a couple of months later the pregnancy test is still negative and you are feeling miserable. After going for a walk and seeing some pregnant women you start to think that it is working for everyone except for you and your partner."

Consider what would happen and how you would feel every time you see a pregnant woman?

This thought experiment is an example of the psychological phenomenon called confirmation bias. Your brain makes a claim or assumption about the world (in this case that everyone is able to have a child except for you and your partner) and your subconsciousness cherry-picks evidence supporting your claim, while ignoring every piece of evidence disproving it. This is just one of many possible ways our psychology affects our perception of the world in "non-truthful" ways. We therefore live in an illusion of the world shaped by our own beliefs, values and subconscious influences.

This egocentric psychological way of perceiving the world leads to us inflicting suffering on other individuals without the intent to do so. Kant describes this as the "Hang zum Boesen". If this egocentric way of perceiving the world is the *conditio humana*, it necessarily follows that a good will alone is not sufficient anymore, because it is unconsciously and negatively affected by our egocentric way of perceiving the world. Since it is our moral duty to reduce suffering and the good will is not sufficient anymore, we must accept the *Telos* of finding reality as our moral duty. Only through rigorous reflection on our conscious and subconscious is it possible to use our good will to actually pursue good actions.

My second argument concerns the autonomy and dignity of others. Acting upon your own good will without taking the reality of other individuals into account violates their autonomy and dignity independent of intention. Moral responsibility extends beyond the concept of intention and includes the duty to account for other people's realities. This can be formulated precisely. First, whoever acts without seeing the reality of the other treats that person not as an autonomous end in themselves, but as a projection of their own ego. Second, moral responsibility is not exhausted by good intention alone it includes the duty of perception. Third, the structural orientation of constant self-reflection is the only means by which the negative psychological influences on our perception can be systematically reduced. Therefore, it is our responsibility to accept this *Telos* and this great task in life in order to preserve and respect the autonomy and dignity of all humans around us.

Proponents of an opposing view may raise the objection that not everyone is capable of self-reflecting to the same degree. Education, academic background and financial circumstances all influence one's capacity for self-reflection. On this view, this moral responsibility could be a privilege rather than a universal duty and therefore cannot be demanded of all of humanity.

Yet this objection, while raising a concern, ultimately misunderstands the nature of the duty being proposed. A moral duty does not presuppose equal capacity for its fulfillment and it defines a direction, not a uniform standard. Kant's duty of truthfulness applies universally even though people differ greatly in their ability to resist the temptation to lie. The same logic applies here. Furthermore, the *Telos* structure of the great task already anticipates this concern. Since reality is a direction and not a destination, the duty is not to achieve perfect perception but to strive sincerely within the limits of one's own capacity. The objection targets a perfectionist reading of the claim, which the second interpretation explicitly rejects. The duty remains universal; its fulfillment remains gradual.

With the objection addressed, I turn to the broader significance of this question. If the egocentric distortion of reality is the *conditio humana*, then many of the moral failures we observe in the world—indifference, structural injustice, everyday interpersonal harm—are not primarily the result of malicious will, but of collective perceptual blindness. A society that understands self-reflection as a moral duty would not only reduce individual harm, but would also subject its collective illusions—political, social, institutional—to the same critical scrutiny. The great task is therefore not a private matter of personal virtue. It is the foundation of any seriously moral community. If we accept that moral action requires seeing the other as they truly are, and that this seeing demands active and ongoing effort, then the search for reality is not merely a component of morality. It is its precondition.

In conclusion, the quote is correct in its diagnosis. The human being lives structurally in illusion, and this illusion has real moral consequences for others. The great task is best understood as a *Telos* and therefore a permanent structural orientation of self-reflection, not an achievable state. Because moral action requires genuinely seeing the other, and because this seeing demands active effort, the pursuit of reality is not optional. This duty is gradual, not absolute and it demands striving, not perfection, and is therefore universal without being elitist.

Whoever wishes to act well cannot avoid this duty. The search for reality is not the beginning of morality. It is morality itself, since morality is always intersubjective.