

**Topic 4:** *“We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality.”*

## **On the reckless but noble search for knowledge**

### **1. Introduction**

Imagine yourself at the age of five, for instance. You believe that Santa Claus brings you presents because you have been a good kid throughout the year. You may even believe you know Santa Claus brings you presents for that exact reason. But then you start doubting it, right? And realize it had been your parents all along, and you're so certain about it that even this whole example feels like a cliché attempting to illustrate any possibility for justified skepticism.

Before proceeding with a thesis, I will define the key concepts necessary for interpreting Murdoch's fragment. A fantasy world, which is equivalent to a world of illusion, represents the set of beliefs that we hold about reality and think of as knowledge (as true and justified) while they may not be true and we may actually lack an irrefutable justification for their truth. Reality, on the other hand, is defined as the set of all objects existing in a way that is independent from their subjective interpretation (note that a subject is treated as independent from other subjects and capable of being at least partially interpreted through their causal relationships with you the subject, other subjects and objects). Finally, a “great task” is defined as a normative criterion for the best possible way to live as a subject, while knowledge is defined as a true justified belief in which the justification is necessarily true so as to avoid a Gettier case.

I agree with the first sentence of the quote and contend that reality in itself is unknowable given that: 1) every belief a subject considers true because of a justification and therefore, considers a piece of knowledge, is defined in relation to other beliefs supporting it, meaning they must necessarily be true for the specific belief (held as knowledge) to be true, which cannot be guaranteed; 2) the mind of the subject is necessary for forming beliefs supporting other beliefs about reality but is also limited in the ways it can interpret empirically what counts as real as well as in the ways it is able to reason using deduction or induction given the necessity for true premises as well as the limited nature of said premises; and 3) the existence of a ‘fantasy world’ that is distinct from reality presupposes that the subject exists in order to interpret reality as well as that it is intentional so as to form its beliefs (which are an illusion) about specific objects and it is at least partially rational in order to abstract ideas from experience or already contain

them. However, I do not agree that ‘finding reality’ should be normative (“the great task”) because living requires accepting a variety of beliefs as true and defining reality may be impossible to achieve, rendering such criteria for living meaningless.

## **2. Argument on the limits of justified beliefs**

Firstly, I believe Quine’s holistic approach to beliefs is an appropriate starting point. In his *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*, he rejects the distinction between analytic and synthetic truths and argues for a web of beliefs, in which every belief is necessary for justifying the rest of them. In that sense, I accept that a belief is limited and defined by being justified through other beliefs and that forming a new belief forces a revision of the entire web so as it does not lead to contradiction (which makes it unjustifiable by the beliefs it contradicts). However, I reject that such a web of beliefs can be considered anything other than an illusion (as defined above) because each web can always be revised and changed through other beliefs and it is not necessary for them to identically reflect reality in order to be coherent and not lead to internal contradiction. Therefore, using justifications as a foundation for acquiring knowledge seems to be unreliable because it requires postulating certain statements as universally necessary truths (contradicting the web of beliefs) in order to know any other object and its causal relationships that constitutes reality. These statements are as follows: at least one object necessarily exists; at least one subject necessarily exists; a subject is able to objectively know at least one object. However, a contradiction also arises in the relationship between a subject and the other objects of the reality around it because even if the subject itself exists, it is not necessarily true outside the proposed web of beliefs that any subject-object interaction is but another piece of this same web. In order to begin justifying objects, we can also take an empirical approach, which still hinges on the postulated but unjustified belief that at least one object exists and interacts with our senses (which by definition perceive specific qualities of certain objects, meaning their reliability is also limited). In other words, justification (in a foundationalist or a coherentist system) inevitably leads to circularity because our knowledge is either defined by a coherent but limited system and/or by postulating necessary statements that have to justify themselves.

## **3. Argument on the limits of the subject’s ability to form beliefs**

Secondly, even if we accept the existence of a subject as true (which is necessary for the existence of knowledge), we cannot reasonably identify knowing our subjective interpretation of reality with knowing the objective nature of reality, which as a thesis is neatly presented by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* through the concepts of noumena (the-thing-in-itself, or

reality) and phenomena (the mind's subjective interpretation of reality and the set of all it knows and can potentially know). If we reason from this point of view, this would necessarily mean that reality is unknowable and the only object we can possibly know (postulating it as a separate object for the sake of this specific argument) is the set of subjective beliefs we hold about what is true and how it is defined. In that sense, it is also necessary to consider the mind's ability to form beliefs in the form of categories (space, time) and modalities (causality, plurality, singularity, etc.) in Kant's epistemology. This means that in order to know, the subject (or their mind) must firstly be able to define objects (that are a part of the "illusion", or phenomena) and relate them to the positive definitions of other objects through negation (one object is not all other objects). Therefore, the subject itself is limited by its ability to define objects, which is necessary for knowing them (in other words, it cannot potentially know without a definition, which itself is a key characteristic defining the concept of a subject). I accept that a definition is necessarily finite in order for it to be compared to other definitions. Therefore, a phenomenal world (world of illusions) consisting of beliefs about the definitions of objects is also necessarily finite, being bound by its own finite definition mentioned above. Being finite, it can only lead to a finite potential of changing, revising, and redefining the beliefs constituting this world of illusions because there is a limited number of ways they could change logically, which is smaller than the entire number of ways they could change with and without internal contradictions (in other words, it is again bound by the limited empirical ability of the subject to perceive reality and by the unsubstantiated truth value of the premises for its conclusions).

#### **4. Argument on the presupposition of the subject**

Another crucial point to discuss is the acceptance of a necessary knowing subject. The subject is defined, first and foremost, by being intentional about its beliefs (capable of defining them) as well as being rational (able to form them). However, I would argue that a defined subject (and its stability) is but another belief that is unjustified. I will briefly take a look at two theories that argue in favor of the malleable and even undefined nature of the subject. David Hume, being an empiricist, for instance, argues that the self is simply the set of perceptions (the unities of impression and idea), while Michelle Foucault, a poststructuralist, argues that the subject isn't stable and defined but rather the result of the historical development of what can be thought given the current power structures as well as the decentralized system of disciplinary power. Both theories, though, acknowledge that the subject is causally influenced and thus, its definition is changed because of external influences (which, in turn, makes it necessary for

reality to causally interact with the subject that is part of it in order for said subject to even begin forming beliefs about reality). A counterpoint to such statement would be Descartes's *Cogito, ergo sum*, which posits that being able to reason (necessary for forming beliefs) is a premise that inevitably leads to the conclusion that a self exists, or that at least something – an object or a subject – exists (refer to the first argument). In contrast, I argue that the ability to reason, while needed for forming a belief and then an entire web of beliefs as well as needed for accepting a subject with its key characteristic of being able to form beliefs, is substantiated only by itself and not by another true justified belief, which, as clarified, is necessary for knowledge. Therefore, I do not categorically reject the subject, but I reject the ability of a subject to justify itself (provided it exists) and reach knowledge of itself because even if defined, it cannot use another object to justify its existence reliably (whether that be a rational belief, which has a necessary source – a subject, – or empirical perceptions) because it also cannot justify the existence of other object categorically.

#### **5. A brief mention of the normative nature of ‘finding’ reality**

Lastly, I wanted to mention the ethical and normative aspect of the topic apart from the epistemological one. The author states that the great task, as defined above, is achieving knowledge of reality. However, I would argue that such knowledge is irrelevant normatively because if the entire web of beliefs we create either as separate subjects or even as just one subject that cannot reliably justify the existence of other subjects in the reality contains beliefs about what we should and should not do still influences us, as subjects, on a purely subjective level, then it can also justifiably matter in the fantasy world we live in. However, without reliable knowledge for “reality”, or the noumena as understood by Kant, I argue that we should not force our beliefs onto it (in that case, in terms of normativity or even if we believe that it is a duty to achieve knowledge about it) because then we would only create another piece of the entire web in the form a belief about reality in itself, which would need to be justified by other (true) beliefs and would be limited by the finite nature of our ability to reason as discussed above.

#### **6. Conclusion**

On balance, I have argued that reality in itself is unknowable because of three main reasons: firstly, our inability to guarantee that a justified belief is true because each one hinges on other beliefs; secondly, the limitations of a subject's mind in forming beliefs, and lastly, because of the unsubstantiated belief of a subject that elicits doubt about even considering every other

point made. In addition, I argued that knowing reality cannot be reduced to a normative criterion because it may be impossible to achieve such knowledge and normativity only matters within the considered web of beliefs where it relates to its objects.