

Are possible worlds really 'real'?

The first question to ask here is: “What is real?” How do we define the meaning of real?

Beginning already with the classical philosophers, “real” seemed to refer predominantly to the physical or material world – sort of, if we can touch it, it’s real. Of course, that is not enough to cover all phenomena in our world.

Therefore it was necessary to extend the concept in two ways:

There are material items that are beyond our reach like the stars, which are too large and too far away or like the microscopic world beyond our ability to distinguish. Therefore indirect observation had to be admitted to categorize material reality.

There are processes that appear not material in itself, like thinking or dreaming. Therefore these processes had to be explained as kind of a by-product of the existence of physical reality.

Most prominently, these ideas were pervasive in the theoretical foundations of Communism during the Stalinist era.

However, also from very early on, there were questions how to explain what seemed to be independent of the material world – what couldn’t be explained as a consequence of the material world. Examples are questions like: what are mind, soul, free will, thinking, and “super-natural” phenomena falling into the realm of the spiritual and religion? Some philosophers like Descartes even went so far as to deny the existence of physical reality: “it’s all in the mind” – real is what one experiences in the mind (whatever “the mind” is). But that creates quite some difficulties to explain why for example two persons have coordinated memories of events or are “seeing” the same external phenomena – if it’s all in the mind, why should it be coordinated between different minds? Does a second mind even exist, or is it all imagination?

So, neither interpretation is one easy to defend. In our day-to-day world, both the physical and the spiritual components exist and they do interact. It appears to me, that this led first to the concept of dualism – not necessarily “good and bad”, but that the world includes two totally different realities, the physical and the spiritual. I dare say that for most people the relationship between these two are rather mystical and unexplainable, creating for them a world of beliefs that no longer need to be rational or logical. Religion and superstition seem to be typical attempts to deal with such dilemmas. It allows people to define for themselves a “perceived” reality that does not even need to be consistent in any rational sense. At this point, there are “individual” realities: what’s real for one person is not necessarily real for another. The question arises: Are there many individual realities or is there one reality that is experienced differently by different minds?

All this leads to quite a quagmire trying to find some solid ground to use as a basis for a definition of “real”. It appears that the only thing we can declare as “real” is that there is no way to define the term “real” – and I would even qualify that as: to define it in the world that we humans can perceive.

However, I would like to add to this a point that I have not seen discussed elsewhere: If we assume reality exists in the sense that we can touch it, experience it via indirect methods, or even just think or imagine it, then it really is a function of time. At this very moment, I am touching my keyboard, I feel the seat under my body, I have the beginnings of a sentence in my mind, etc. – it all is real for me. But a minute from now, an hour later, or tomorrow, all it is, is a memory, an image, a feeling of something in the past. Similarly, yesterday it was a foreboding, a plan, and an expectation only.

Therefore reality in the strict sense is something of the moment, something we pass through from “now” to “now”. We do have memories relating to what was “now” previously and we do have the capacity for some projection into what will be “now” in the future. But neither is real at this moment – unless we allow both the past and the future to be defined as real.

It is probably easier to accept the past as real – what we experience at the moment is largely a consequence of how the past developed for us. And mostly we accept that – especially if multiple people or minds describe experiences that are highly similar (differences explained by different angles of view, imperfect memory, etc.)

It is much more difficult to accept the future as real. Everybody projects into the future in different ways, and the further in time it reaches, the more it diverges. In fact even a single individual mind may see multiple paths into the future.

And with that, we are discussing “possible worlds”. Are they real? Not in the sense of “here and now” – but

certainly in the larger world of memories and imagination.

Note: The limit of about 800 words is exhausted right now – nevertheless, I am quite curious whether the strange physical realities of Quantum theory could help to dive deeper into the topic. A completely different question for this same topic: How does schizophrenia fit in – does it add another dimension of “reality”?