

Welcome to the Real World

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Just as soon as I'm elected King of the World, there's a phrase I'm going to declare illegal.

This is a phrase you've heard a lot of times. It's said as a kind of put down, a marker that you're somehow smarter, more clued up and sophisticated than other people. You look at someone and say, in a dismissive tone, "Welcome to the real world."

What this usually means is that the object of the comment is a fuzzy-headed dreamer, not really savvy enough to understand how things really work. It has synonyms: "Welcome to Planet Earth" is one. Another that's gaining ground comes from a TV advert: "Wake up and smell the coffee." I've had it said to me, more than once. It means something like this: "Your ideas are not much more than fantasy. Grow up. Things just don't work that way."

I've found that this line of talking is usually employed by those who want to justify The Way Things Are, and who want to do that because they in some way benefit from it. We hear it now in the condescending tones of people who say that good economic policy involves making things easy for billionaires so that some of the pixie dust of entrepreneurship will rub off on us scruffy millions. "Welcome to the real world." We hear it in the croaking voice of Gordon Gekko, the "greed is good" guy from the Oliver Stone film. "Welcome to the real world." We hear it in the justifications for our support for dictators, both now and in the past. "Welcome to the real world." Is someone praying that their cash-strapped lower division football team can somehow beat an oil sheik's hobby club in the Champions League? "Welcome to the real world."

But what is this "real world" they're talking about? If I had to analyse it, I'd say that it was a world of hopelessly stacked odds, which you ignore at your peril. That being the case, you learn how to play the system, and dismiss idealism, optimism and faith as childish and useless indulgences. This world is composed of hard edges and is solely materialistic in its outlook. And, because that's the case, fuzzy-headed notions of cooperation replacing raw competitive behaviour, for example, are not just unrealistic, but downright silly. Fairy tales. What matters is something known as "the bottom line".

This way of looking at life isn't new. In fact, you might think of it as the default position of humanity. It's the same mentality that wants to relegate poets to irrelevance, whip children out of their dreamy world and exile and execute prophets. Take Socrates, for instance.

The Athens of 400 BC was an up and coming society. They had invented a form of democracy, though that was limited to property-owning men. They had Olympian gods in place, though even then people didn't pay all that much attention to religion. Socrates was a bit out of place. He often refused to wear shoes, for one thing. He was ugly, with an outsized head, and didn't wash all that much. He was popular with a gang of young people who thought he was cool. He taught them things *al fresco*, in an olive grove and sometimes in bars. He had a different take on the phrase "real world".

We don't have a single word actually written by Socrates. Most of what we know of him comes from his disciple, Plato. It was he that developed the philosophical school called Platonism, a form of which is still around. In basic terms, Plato believed that the world we see—that which can be weighed, described and measured—was a pale reflection or shadow of the real world. His most famous exposition of this idea came in the Parable of the Cave.

He asked pupils to imagine a cave, completely cut off from sunlight, in which men (it was always men, I'm afraid) were chained in place with their heads pointed toward a wall onto which the shadows of puppets were projected. Kind of an early cinema, maybe, or a nascent form of virtual reality. Because they didn't know any better, they believed that what they saw on the screen was reality. Then, Plato said, imagine one man who is able to slip his chains and make his way to the cave entrance. He walks blinking into the sunlight, and for the first time sees things as they really are. It is so overwhelming that he can't take in what he is seeing. He only knows that what is before his eyes is real, and that the images on the cave wall are not.

There's no happy ending to the tale, though. When he goes back into the gloom and tries to tell others what he has seen, they at first think he is mad, then subversive. Finally, they have no choice but to kill him. That's what happened to the subversive Socrates, by the way. The senate declared him to be dangerous to the young minds he was teaching, and he was required to drink a bowl of hemlock tea—poison, to us.

The central meaning of Platonism is that we only imagine that what we see is real, when it is actually just a pale version of a much more significant reality that lies outside our ability to perceive. The way to access this reality, or leave the cave, was through philosophy—though we can interpret that today as religious experience as well as mere reason. "Welcome to the real world" meant transcending the poor version of truth we're accustomed to and finding a higher one.

Most people, Socrates said, were—get ready for some Greek here-- "*eu a mousoi*", which in ancient Greek means, literally, "content without the muses". In other words, happy to live a flat, materialistic life, ignoring the hunches and intuitions of something finer and more real.

You might think that the senate was right to silence Socrates. After all, he was telling young people—or showing them how to discover, actually—that the so-called "real world" of the time wasn't the whole picture at all. Radical stuff. Stuff that threatens to rob power from the establishment. One way he did this was by declaring that beauty and truth were one and

the same. That what we call beauty is a beckoning intuition toward the *really* real. But if you take the side of the senate, you might be surprised to discover that the farther we advance in philosophy and even fields like quantum mechanics, the more reasonable Plato and Socrates seem.

The philosophical rage of the past few decades has been post-modernism, in which ideas were “deconstructed”, or analysed outside their context. (Be patient with me, I’m not going to deliver an academic lecture here!) We now know that everything we know, or think we know, is filtered through a screen of relativity. Heisenberg told us that the very act of observing something changes its nature. Anthropologists like Margaret Mead altered the societies they were trying to study. Light is BOTH a wave and a particle, depending on which scientist you’re talking to. We now realise that knowledge itself is a dodgy proposition; two people observing the same thing see differently—sometimes radically so. Old absolutes have been evaporating like dew drops on a car hood. The slogan of the Beat Generation said it like this: “Compared to what, Man?”

All of this is beginning to sound more and more like the crude images inside Plato’s cave. Shadows on the wall. The view from our cave is less reliable the more we find out. Is this the “real world” the cynics want us to live in? When Socrates invited his pupils to live in the real world, he meant something else.

Up against the real world, Socrates thought of where we spend our time as the world of materialism. Now, that word has been hijacked to mean a kind of eager consumerism, maybe someone who is miserable without 400 pairs of shoes. It does reflect the real meaning of the word, but doesn’t do it justice. Materialism is a way of looking at reality that says that everything, absolutely *everything* that is, is composed of matter and energy. That includes consciousness, by the way. So materialism, the world of Plato’s cave, is all about stuff. If you can’t put a ruler to it, plunk it on a scale and measure it, register its velocity, etc., then it simply doesn’t exist.

Virtually all of current science is enmeshed in this idea, and that’s reasonable. It was never designed to reveal the meaning of things; only to say how they work. From a completely materialistic perspective, Plato’s real world cannot exist; if it did, we would have discovered it, maybe in the Large Hadron Collider. That’s it then. The guy who escaped from the cave was having a hallucination. If he kept on about it, you’d have no choice but to kill him, would you?

Well, out that particular window went poetry, art and mystical experience. There went love, too, inasmuch as they will one day discover an enzyme under a microscope that explains it away. There went the gasp of breath that happens when you see a mountain sunrise that makes you want to drop to your knees. And there went the moment of recognition—yes, recognition—that you experience on first viewing your new-born child.

But wait, you silly denizens of the fantasy world. All is not lost. A lovely guy called Stephen Jay Gould published a paper in 1997 that offers a way round this problem. His idea is called “non-overlapping magisteria”. Yes, that is a mouthful. But here’s what he means by

it: that both scientific materialism and religious experience are true. They each have what he called “teaching authority”, but there’s one problem: at no point do they overlap. That means the big project is to determine the boundaries.

Right now, the scientific, materialistic side is making most of the running. The “real world” of the materialist is in top form, and the quiet little intuitions of the religious are having a rough time. That makes the sneers of the “*eu a mousoi*” possible. As Socrates said, they’re quite happy to live without the muses” and to ignore the deep intuitions that animate those of us who feel that there must be something we’ve overlooked or not learned to yet to see.

But it’s more than just a simple difference of opinion, you know. Decisions that affect people’s lives are being made from that materialistic vantage point. It’s right to wonder whose lives will be made miserable by adhering to their so-called “real world”. Families in Aleppo? African farmers who share a river delta with a big oil company? Old people whose pensions have been halved by economic necessity? You make your own list.

When I first heard of Plato’s notion of a realer world that lies just out of sight, I seemed to understand what he meant. Nothing I could put my finger on—just what I’d have to call a hunch. Every once in a while I have a moment’s intuition that seems to tell me that there is more—much more—to what I call my life than I am able to comprehend. I would hate to have to prove it, but, then, I don’t have to. I’ll leave all that to the scientists.

But what I’d really like to do is take charge of that phrase and say to everyone who comes in to a place like this, “Welcome to the real world.” The really real world that we can only dimly make out from here, but that something un-measurable, un-weighable and with no registered velocity at all tells us is where we’re headed. And maybe, someday, where we belong.

AMEN