

1.

”At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Matter and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night.”

- Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* (ca. 1190 AD)

For millenia humans have pondered the true nature of reality; this can be seen all the way in some of the earliest remaining philosophical works of the presocratics, and even before that in ancient religions providing explanations for natural phenomena. Through the development of philosophy many have attempted to explain reality and our existence not through god-figures and myths, but through reason. This reason-based pursuit of truth has been romanticized by many, and throughout the centuries has led to different theories about the structure of the universe – and the structure of those things which may exist outside the universe.

However, could this usage of reason to discover our place in reality be going too far? Is there even a reason for us humans to know the absolute facts behind the phenomena we observe? These questions I will try to answer in my essay.

In *The Guide for the Perplexed* (ca. 1190 AD), Moise Maimonides claims that occasionally mankind catches clear glimpses of truth. Nevertheless, he states, at all other times matter and habit veil our perception, returning us to darkness almost as thick as before.

As is usual in philosophy, in order to understand and analyze Maimonides’ claim, one must have a clear conception of the terms he’s using. For the purpose of this essay, I define ”truth” as referring to certain, underlying facts about the nature of reality. For example, a man may perceive a table with his eyes, but the entity causing those perceptions, the real table – to know that entity, and to have a full understanding of its traits and attributes – that is to know truth.

What about the two things Maimonides claims to disturb mankind’s connection to this truth: ”matter” and ”habit”? With ”matter” Maimonides is referring to the world we are able to observe. Likewise, rationalist philosophers, among others, have claimed that none of our perceptions are to be trusted; that truth can only be found through reason, as analytical knowledge. ”Habit”, on the other hand, I define as referring to social norms and bodily obligations. How could one go about and question the nature of reality, while simultaneously being trapped in a human body with corporeal needs such as hydration and nutrition, all while living in a human society which expects one to abide to certain rules and live a certain kind of life, one which those holding power have pre-defined for everyone else.

All the same, Maimonides still believes that on occasion, humans can figure truth out – or at least parts of it. Examples for this could be the logically indisputable discoveries of mathematics, or perhaps Descartes’ famous cogito – though the latter didn’t exist in Maimonides’ time yet. He also claims that each time mankind perceives glimpses of truth, the darkness we return to isn’t quite as dense as it was before. This I interpret as Maimonides encouraging fellow humans to pursue the truth, even if it is difficult, for with each new discovery the darkness brought upon us by our limited, corporeal forms turns brighter.

I believe Maimonides is correct in the sense that ultimately we know very little about the true nature of reality. However, there is another point Maimonides makes in his text through metaphors, almost in silence. He portrays the truth as ”light” and our perception-caused unknowingness of this truth as ”darkness”. These terms instantly cause certain associations between ideas, especially in the context

of the religion-centered times of medieval philosophy. Maimonides paints our perception of reality as a miserable state of darkness we should seek to leave behind us, while depicting truth as something of the "light", something good, something objectively worth seeking for. With this, I disagree.

The absolute truth about reality is somewhere out there. Frankly, it could be literally anything. Perhaps we are living in a Matrix-style simulation, perhaps there exists a near-infinite number of universes and gods before us, or perhaps we truly are living in the one and only plane of existence. While some people tirelessly attempt to discover this knowledge through simulation theories or pondering about God, I believe we should restrain from such thought.

The goal of human life is to achieve happiness and a sense of fulfillment. To feel like one is living a meaningful life, to be perfectly comfortable with one's existence in every moment in life, is quite literally the peak human experience. This goal, this sense of meaning and happiness, is completely achievable in our perceived reality, in this universe. To perplex oneself with these concepts of higher realities is counterproductive for achieving the goal of human life. For when one gives value to something outside this universe, one gives less value to this universe, and does not work for the benefit of it and its residents. However, we are this universe; it is a part of us and we are a part of it – therefore we should always seek to work towards the good of it.

One could propose a counter-argument: What if these higher planes of existence are far more important than the one we currently reside in? Instead of pursuing fulfillment in this universe, should we do so in another – and therefore, wouldn't it be in our interest to find out what these higher planes of existence are like? Can we ever be fulfilled in this state of being, if our true state of being is something wholly different?

My answer to this is that if our conscious minds were to be transported into a higher plane of existence – say, by dying – we would not be quite the same people anymore. Our material, human bodies, and our limited perception of reality are key factors in shaping our personalities and minds. This can be proven, for example, through lobotomy treatments. In lobotomy, parts of a human's brain – parts of the physical body -- were destroyed with a metal tool. This caused radical changes in the patients' personalities, turning them from energetic and even aggressive people into apathic and overly calm people.

In addition, the way we perceive this three-dimensional space with our senses automatically affects the way we think and organize our thoughts. Even if a person's soul was to be transported into another universe, I argue that a core part of that person would inevitably be left behind in this one. Our state of existence is tied to this world; we are the people who we are in this world alone.

If we are indeed transported into another world at some point in time, then at that point we can start worrying about that world, as creatures of that world. To ponder other planes of existence is a waste of time, for it distracts us from the very purpose of our current state of existence. Once more: we are a part of this world, and this world is a part of us – that is our purpose in this life, to make the best of this world for all mankind.

David Hume, often seen as an extreme skepticist, also came to the conclusion that we cannot know much, if anything, for certain. He states that the use of reason to justify our existence will only lead to our existence seeming less and less certain. Sometimes questions such as "Who am I?" and "Where am I?" plagued his mind.

However, he came to a happy conclusion. He claims that regardless of how much one ponders about these matters and questions themselves, after ceasing to philosophize about existence and going to

do something else, soon enough every single human being will be assured of their own existence and of the world's existence. It is in our human nature to intuitively believe in the perceived world. Even if abstract ideas and existential crises may worry us, luckily nature has programmed human beings to focus on the reality at hand.

Another counter-argument is to place inherent value on knowledge. Curiosity and the search for information is also a part of human nature, as it has been for millenia. "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied", it has been said – being happy and fulfilled isn't the only thing worth reaching for in human life.

If one is to place value on knowledge, I ask the following question: Why do you place value in knowledge? Ultimately, the answer is always the same: Pursuing knowledge and truth causes positive emotional reactions in people, and for that reason they wish to pursue the truth. Once more, the underlying motives behind such behaviour are the feelings of happiness, meaning and fulfillment.

Again I shall refer to Hume, as he has stated that reason does not motivate a person to do something, but is instead always a slave to emotions. Likewise I argue that all human behaviour is motivated by emotions, and emotions are the only thing which truly hold inherent value for a person.

Knowledge does have pragmatic value, for understanding how the world works can make it easier to achieve fulfillment. Knowing causalities and correlations between events, and applying that information in one's life can make life less unpredictable and happiness easier to reach.

However, knowledge of events outside this universe seems to have no pragmatic value. Thus far science has not encountered obstacles which could not be explained in terms of this world's phenomena -- obstacles which would require the existence of higher realities in order to be explained. It seems highly unlikely such obstacles should ever appear, unless we tread outside the area of knowledge which is meaningful for a happy human life.

What if someone truly feels happy and fulfilled by pursuing the absolute truth, even if goes beyond our own existence? In that case, I regret to inform to this person that their pursuit is futile and thus they shall never find their fulfillment through such means. At most, from mankind's point of view, we can argue for the existence of higher planes of existence, but it is quite impossible to actually figure out what these planes may or may not entail. One major reason for this is that our imagination is limited to the world we live in. Let us re-examine the example of a man perceiving a table. The man can never hope to grasp the nature of true entity, the "real table", for this table can always possess attributes wholly unknown to the man's perception of reality, ones none of us could ever hope to imagine.

If we're looking at this matter in terms of achieving happiness, we can turn towards psychology. In psychology, it is claimed that a person finds meaning in life through other people – not through abstract bits of information. I claim that is our purpose in this life: to work for the betterment of all mankind, and to achieve collective happiness on Earth, perhaps beyond.

Moses Maimonides was most certainly correct in believing that truth – excluding some tiny bits and pieces -- is far beyond our reach, for our corporeal forms and social systems restrict our abilities to pursue that information. However, the world of empirical perceptions we spend our lives in is far from "the thickest darkness of the night", as Maimonides puts it.

Humans are creatures guided by their emotions, by their pursuit of meaning and fulfillment. The meaning of our existence is found in our world, and none other. Therefore, to answer my questions, there is indeed a limit on how much one should philosophize and think about all the possibilities beyond this world. From the human point of view, I claim that the absolute truths about reality do not matter. All that matters for us is knowledge of the world we live in, knowledge we can use to achieve our happiness. There is no reason for us to know the true causalities between entities which cause the world to function as it does; we only need to know about correlations between perceived events, for that information is all that is useful for us.

Our purpose is for ourselves to find, and it can be found through other people – and why limit it to just humans: One could find their purpose through working for the good of all life on Earth. We should not wait for some Matrix to reveal itself, some higher plane of existence to define how we should live our lives. For the third and the last time: we are a part of this world, and it is a part of us. We exist the way we are only in this world. Thus it is our purpose to work for the benefit of this world. This is our reality, so let's make it the best it can be.