Traction on Reality

An Inquiry into the Nature of Things

José Soto

Every single human being has a view of reality. It is impossible to function without one. And it is that understanding of the world we all assume that informs the answers we give to the most foundational questions we can ask: *Who am I? What sort of world is this?* and *What is life for?* Without some sort of answer to those basic questions, we couldn't function as normal persons or have meaningful relationships. And so, from the very beginning of our lives, as infants, we start gathering data trying to make sense of the world we find ourselves in. And very soon, with the help of family and culture, an understanding of the world starts to form and continues to develop over the years.[1]

This project is an invitation to continue exploring this world we live in, making sure our understanding of the world corresponds to the way things actually are. Obviously, there are many different versions of reality out there. And they can't all be right. Some must be closer to the truth than others. So, how are *we* doing? How much traction on reality do we really have? And how do we gage that: how do we sort out what is true and real from fantasy and misinformation, reliable sources from questionable ones? This project brings together resources to help answer those questions, to get more and more traction on reality, and help us find our way in the world.[2]

Mapping Reality

If we ask the experts (philosophers, in this case), they would say that reality is comprised of three basic domains: *nature* (organic and inorganic matter), *sentient minds* (humans and animals with conscious mental states), and *culture* (the product of the interplay between sentient minds and nature).[3]

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[1] See, for example, Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011).

[2] This is the essay version of an online discussion by José Soto: "Traction on Reality," Wayfinders, June 12, 2021, https://www.wayfinders.quest/traction-on-reality.html.

[3] This breakdown is originally from Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). See the helpful summary by Ilkka Niiniluoto, *Critical Scientific Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23ff. My wording is adapted from Andrew Wright, *Religious Education and Critical Realism: Knowledge, Reality and Religious Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 202.

However, if we ask religious believers and others, many would say there's something missing in that list: namely, the *spiritual* dimension of reality. In fact, in some traditions the spiritual dimension is a whole world in its own right, including a supernatural realm with its own populations, histories and situations.[4] If we accept the spirit-realm (however we conceive it) as an aspect of reality, it's probably best to think of reality as consisting of two broader dimensions: the *physical* and the *metaphysical*, each with its corresponding domains.

In this scheme of things, the *physical* comprises nature, sentient minds and culture (since we know that sentient minds and culture *emerge* from the physical),[5] while the *metaphysical* comprises all that does *not* emerge from the physical, including the spiritual and the supernatural (if they do in fact exist), but also questions about the ultimate order-of-things and the meaning of life.[6]

This is basically the picture of reality assumed in this project, except that we won't assume the reality of a spirit-realm until we tackle that question later on. The opposite is also true: we won't assume that the natural world is all there is until we examine the evidence available with open minds to whatever we find.

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[4] This is certainly the case in the narrative-world of the Bible.

[5] For a helpful explanation of the idea and reality of *emergence*, see the interdisciplinary work of sociologist Christian Smith: *What Is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 25–42; see also Elly Vintiadis, "Emergence," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed July 11, 2020, https://www.iep.utm.edu/emergenc/.

[6] For now, I am also including all the topics traditionally and currently assigned to "metaphysics" under my use of that term: ontology, categories or being, first causes, unchanging things, universals, modality, substance, the space/time relationship, the mental/physical relationship, etc., since most of it is abstract in nature. I have noticed various and conflicting understandings of the scope of metaphysics in the literature. For example, some consider ontology part of metaphysics, while others consider metaphysics part of ontology. And some argue we don't even need metaphysics at all! I personally don't find this branch of philosophy very helpful, though we do need categories for all the stuff it covers. At this point, however, I am simply using *physical/metaphysical* as convenient terminology to distinguish the physical and what emerges from it from what isn't physical and doesn't emerge from it. If in the end this usage tuns out to be problematic, I might use "spiritual" (in a broad sense) instead. For a helpful explanation of metaphysics in philosophy, see Peter van Inwagen and Meghan Sullivan, "Metaphysics," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/metaphysics/. See also Achille C. Varzi, "On Doing Ontology Without Metaphysics," *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, no. 1 (2011): 407–23, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2011.00222.x.

Intellectual Hospitality

Of course, this is a Christian project, one already committed to a *biblical* view of reality—whatever that might look like by the end of the curriculum. The project, however, is about *reality* itself, and we'll search for the real and for truth wherever it is found. This includes explorations of all major belief systems in the world (both religious and secular), and we'll hear from leading voices within each tradition in order to learn from those who know them best.

The curriculum is also divided into two major parts: the first explores the world in secular terms, while the second looks at the same data from a biblical perspective. This allows us to begin our journey on common ground, while also inviting the reader to see the world in the light of the biblical witness.

These and other features make this a *supra-communal* learning environment, one designed for learners from all backgrounds and traditions.

Our next discussion is an overview of the secular part of the project.

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