THE MIND AS ARCHITECT

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1. Introduction

Observing the gardens, it might be that our eyes meet with a tree, bearing fruits and a cat resting in its shade. Given such an image, the world seems solid, discrete and real. There is nothing to doubt about the impression and reality is solved. Anything that appears to me is there, and it is the way that I experience it to be.

The philosopher, however, will examine this more clearly and pose their own challenges to the assumptions: What if reality is vastly different from what we experience it to be? We experience things, which result from perception, which in turn result from a real world – or so we believe. But in each of those steps, the original message gets translated: First we translate from reality to the senses, then from the senses to the mind, then from the mind to complex constructs, and finally to language.

This paper aims to develop the following thesis:

> **Thesis** The mind does not passively perceive reality – it actively constructs the world we experience.

The process of generating the experienced world can be roughly divided into three layers. The first layer is perception: We perceive some information from the external world and translate it into the mind. The second layer is conceptual: We divide this experienced perception into parts and label them. The third layer is related to meaning: We compute various relations between these concepts, synthesise new ideas, imbue them with meaning and value, and eventually construct entire narratives and worlds.

In doing so, the mind uses its own architectural logic. This logic and the resulting products (e.g., concepts, symbols, ideas) may not match with reality or exhibit properties that lead to dissonance – both externally, in lived life, and internally, in the mind. The next steps would then be to examine the proposed mismatch and discover solutions to lessen that effect.

This paper therefore explores the layers of constructed reality in the mind and aims at a perspective that might become helpful for later endeavours related to attuning the mind to an external reality more efficiently.

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2. Perception as Construction

Prior to philosophical investigation, we often assume that the mechanisms by which perception works is a passive "taking in" of real, stable external information. We may sit someplace, aim our eyes at a tree and that tree somehow translates itself accurately, passively and reliably into our mind. The claim here is, though: Such a process of perceiving things is always a creative, generative and constructive one. The mind is actively engaged in an interpretation that co-creates reality as much as it receives it.

We may take the intuitive example of colours. We all have an experience of such colours as red, green or blue. Seeing a tree with its leaves, we say that it has green leaves. There may, however, be no such thing as "colour" in the external world, and instead is mentally generated. Rather, colour is a phenomenon of the mind, which produces the qualia of e.g. greenness upon interacting with light of a specific wavelength. This illustrates how even the most basic aspect of reality is not real, but constructed – that is, the colours we see are produced by the mind, and what is real are only wavelengths.

There is also further support for this theory in how illusions produce an experience that doesn't match reality. We might think to see a snake on the roadside, only to realise that it has been a piece of rope. Such phenomena indicate that the mind is actively constructing a world that may or may not match with a given reality, and that it is not the exception, but the rule of how the mind works.

When we engage with reality, we don't see separate properties and features, such as the leaves, then the trunk, then the branches and so on, until we have a tree. We see a tree as a whole, complete, discrete object, ready for us to be discovered. However, there is reason to doubt that such objects really exist prior to our interpretation and perceptual construction. It would seem that our mind is a "pattern completing entity": We see forms, shapes, patterns and the mind automatically completes them as per some expectations. We may see this phenomenon occurring in optical illusions, or when seeing only the upper or lower half of a written text. While clearly not being fully visible, the mind can read such information with little difficulties. This is one way of showing that the mind completes a reality that might not be complete necessarily.

What we experience is a result of perception translating something real into the mind. There is thus the difference between "what is out there" and "what we experience" – this difference is part of the mismatch between the real world (i.e. the "outer world") and our mental construction of that world (i.e. our "inner world"). It is also something that will become apparent in lived life, e.g. when our actions produce effects that conflict with reality, and for which the mind might have sophisticated means to deal with.

We can thus claim that whatever it is that produces our sense impressions (possibly the real world), until these perceptions arrive at our mind as experiences, translation[1] processes interpret the information and construct something that may or may not be there (e.g. the snake on the roadside), or even entirely generate new qualities (e.g. colours). This is therefore the first step to understanding the constructive aspects of our minds' experiences.

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3. Concept as Creation

If our second section aimed at illuminating the layer of perception, this section aims at exploring the second layer – the layer of concepts. Primarily, we look at a garden and think "I see a tree." This appears to us to be an existing entity in the world (the tree), ready for us to discover and label with our languages' words (e.g., "tree"). There is something about the tree being its own thing, distinct from everything else around it, such as the air, the soil, grass, insects, and so on. But here we'd like to challenge this view.

We might know of the thought-experiment of trying to find the "chair": We ask ourselves what a chair is. Is it the thing with legs, a back and a surface to sit on? What if it has no back? Is it more akin to a chair or a table? What makes the chair different from a sculpture or art piece? The experiment then takes us through further questions, which all aim to illustrate how unstable even a chair is. At the end, the thinker seems forced to accept that the chair is a mental construct. We will not go into further details here, but briefly introduce the notion of constructed entities, such as chairs.

The inquiry takes us into more examples: Where does a "heap" stop being a "heap"? This is the famous "sorites paradox", in which we all know what a heap of sand is, and that removing one grain should not eliminate the heap, but

[1] It may be worth noting that by using the term "translation", this might assume a complete message that is accessed by the senses. But this may not be the case, and we may not have access to such a layer of reality.

where at some point, the heap turns into only a few grains of sand, i.e. not a heap anymore. Where does the land begin and the sea end? Is it that every wet grain of sand is the sea, and every dry grain of sand is the land? But what about the tides – does this shift the definition dynamically or is there a hidden stable definition somewhere? Which grain of sand still belongs to the sea and which to the land? And what is the definition of a "human" – if we were to examine every ancestor between other primates and us humans, which one would be "clearly human but not non-human"? Is there even such an ancestor? What about people who are braindead? Or the unborn? What is a "human"? – The list could be extended, but for the purposes of this discussion, we merely wanted to illustrate an observation: Our definitions face serious problems once we examine them critically. This suggests that our categories do not reflect real divisions in reality, and the latter might resist our imposition of partitioning.

We may therefore begin to posit the following: the mind carves reality into more or less discrete parts, which it then labels and associates with certain qualities and other constructs. The details are difficult to express linguistically[2], but we may imagine that first, out of the pure experience of seeing a garden, we recognise boundaries and similarities ("patterns"), such as that which we identify as the outline of a tree. These clusters of coherent information get identified and stabilised as their own "entity" – e.g. the tree, but sans the grass or the soil nor air. Each entity then receives a label, a symbol, e.g. the word "tree". These entities then give rise to the abstract thought, the concept of e.g. a tree.

Not only do we carve up reality into parts, but we do it in a particular way: We say that exactly these margins are drawn to encapsule a "thing", an entity, such as a tree, which is a discrete way of doing things. But is reality discrete? Are there really such thing as "individual entities"? Or is everything continuous and interwoven? If we examine the colour spectrum, it would seem that no matter how many times we split the spectrum into individual parts, we can always divide and split those parts into yet smaller parts, ad infinitum. It might be that reality resists division ultimately. But this is the only way in which our minds can operate – dividing into discrete blocks of being[3]. Therefore, it is worth claiming that even at the most fundamental level (i.e. the level of creating entities, concepts, "things") there might be a strong mismatch between reality and our minds.

Once we perceive reality, we begin with a creative process of turning an undefined image into discrete blocks of information – we create entities and

[2] The problem here is, that when we say: "We identify the tree as a 'tree'.", this already presupposes the category of "tree" in reality. But such a category is nowhere to be found in experience. Therefore, when discussing the creation of concepts, if we want to be serious, we couldn't use language to explain it – since language already imposes concepts, and that's what we're trying to avoid.

[3] The mathematical continuous functions are, of course, interesting to mention here.

concepts. This happens automatically and subconsciously. Soon thereafter, we assign linguistic symbols to these creations, such as words. This further gives us the feeling of "stability". Such stability is then further increased once we manifest words into writing, creating dictionaries with standards and share them across minds to anchor meaning. But in all of this we forget that the way in which we carve up and construct reality is not the only possible one. Yet, all our subsequent thinking and living stems from such fundamental processes of constructing concepts.

In this section, we hope to have illustrated the remarkable features of concept construction from pure experience in a very brief manner. This should show how not only do we interpret reality into the mind (i.e. the mechanism of perception), but we make big claims when we divide this reality into concepts for our using in thoughts. Claims, which have consequences for what we can do with our minds and thus bodies, too.

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4. Meaning as Formation

Given our garden example, we tend to think things like: "The tree bears fruits. Fruits are good." And we regard these as truths, as something that seems to lie *in* the tree, *in* the fruits. Meaning and values ("good", "bad") seem to be there for us to discover, passively waiting in the objective world. But here we'd like to challenge this.

It might be that something like a tree has some kind of mental "content", e.g. it is somewhat solid, maybe cool and tall. But there are a few problems: First, all of this seems to – ultimately – result in experience again. We've claimed that first is experience, then we do things with experience. Thus, in some way, we can say that reality (as we construct it) is an indirect model of our own experiences. Second, the "tree" itself is not cool; its bark is cool. And there, it is not that the bark is cool, but that the atoms of the bark interact with us in a way that feels cool. This might get further analysed, and at some point, we might ask: If the tree's properties depend on the bark, the bark's properties on the molecules, and so on, is there anything substantial about the tree to begin with? So, maybe the "tree", if we could or can define it, is not really a substantial thing in semantics and ontology. Regardless, for the purpose of this discussion, we will assume that there is such a thing as a "tree" and that we all know what a "tree" is.

The tree itself doesn't really have meaning the way we'd like it to have. The tree, given by itself, does not constitute a very meaningful idea, until it is

connected to other entities and brought into a relation. It is the simplest tautology to claim that something is itself. What produces meaning is therefore the association of an entity with another entity – e.g., the "tree" with its "fruits". Now we can say things, such as "The tree bears fruits." Or "Fruits are good."[4] In this sense, meaning is something that emerges through associations or relations between the constructed concepts, and is a layer above the concept creation. Therefore, meaning is not intrinsic to isolated entities, but emerges from the relations between such entities. It is therefore that at the simplest level, we have primary associations between concepts, which result in higher-order concepts. For example, we may say that "to make a fruit go from being on the tree to not being on the tree" counts as "harvesting fruits", which connects the initial fruit on the tree with the fruit that is not on the tree. In this manner we have an evolution of concepts and ideas.

Those ideas then give rise to even higher concepts, such as entire narratives (e.g., "the day when I went to harvest fruits from the tree"), higher symbols (e.g., "the grand tree of our people's ancestry") and – ultimately – entire worlds (e.g., "the garden", or "the world itself"). These also connect in their function, ontology and purpose to psychological symbols, such as archetypes, which help us in navigating the world through more-or-less shared concepts, expressed in arts, mythology, and so on.

Meaning is quickly also associated with and tied to our desires and feelings. Shortly after naming a relation (e.g., "the fruit can be eaten"), we may subconsciously interpret this as something we either want or don't want. For example, we may feel hungry and thus feel positively towards the fruit and give it the value of being "good" (for us). We may also feel that this can be universalised and say that "eating fruits is good (ethically)". Thus, by relating desires and feelings with meaning, we create higher-order meaning of aesthetical and ethical kinds.

Even more, once we have more sophisticated objects of meaning (e.g., archetypes, symbols, culturally significant entities), these can be woven into a fabric of culture, art, mythology, religion and philosophies. They now serve not only as guiding as external entities to orient ourselves around, but serve to establish our own identity from inside. For example, we may for generations have harvested from the same tree and thus associate this entity with our very ancestry and identity, "the tree of our people". This tree, external at first, now gets absorbed into the mind as an outward expression of the mind itself.

We may therefore suggest that all meaning is thus: Concepts and entities are brough into relations by the mind. Imbued with significance, value, depth, these

[4] The way that value emerges and how we imbue things with value – probably through a relation to ourselves – is not the main idea of this paper, so we will not look at it in detail.

new constructs are turned into objects of meaning that resemble organisms – which develop, adapt and survive. They form a colourful landscape of the mind, helping us not only navigate the external world but also the internal world. The mind is thus a weaver of a meaningful reality, and by its own creations gets pulled and pushed in various directions (i.e. meaningful structures and objects help motivate the mind in thinking and doing).

This suggests that instead of discovering meaning in the world "out there", it is much rather a constructive, generative and creative mind that builds meaningful objects using complex associations, relations and eventually imbues them with qualities such as values of "good" and "bad".

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5. Conclusion

We have shown and argued that the mind is the creator of our reality. That is, perception is an active and constructive translation process, which is followed by the creation of concepts by dividing experience into parts, and which culminates in the generation of meaning and value through associations and relations of such parts into complex, interconnected structures.

The argued thesis is therefore (to restate from earlier):

Thesis The mind does not passively perceive reality – it actively constructs the world we experience.

This means that what we perceive to be "out there" is really "in here". And it is not passively discovered, but actively shaped and co-authored by the mind. We therefore have two worlds, or two domains of description: the world as it appears to be in our minds, and the world that produced the sense impressions[5]. The maybe more radical proposal is, however: The mind's architectural logic is not the same as the one that brought about the external world. Therefore, these two worlds are generated by two dissimilar mechanisms, akin to two different languages trying to mirror one the other.

The proposed, introduced term here is that of "*incongruence*" – the mismatch between the mind's world and the external, real world. This means that in the process of interpreting, creating, associating, etc. – using the mind's architecture –, the inner world often does not cleanly represent the real world.

[5] This clearly resembles Kant's transcendental idealism, at least superficially.

This can be seen in hallucinations, wrong intuitions (e.g., "the earth is flat") and paradoxes, to name a few.

Such incongruence becomes visible in the mismatch between a discrete, rigid, solid ontology (the mind's), as opposed to often vague, ambiguous and (maybe) continuous qualities (the real world's)[6]. Our philosophical problems might arise from such mismatches in many situations.

If there is such an incongruence between worlds, then we may do well in practicing humility about perceptions and refrain from thinking in absolutes, dogmas and writing anything in stone.

Similar views have also been proposed by thinkers such as Immanuel Kant ("phenomena vs noumena"), the school of Advaita Vedanta ("appearance vs reality") and Buddhist schools ("constructed experience"). As some of these sources are already hundreds of years old, we may claim that the question and this line of thinking has occupied philosophers for centuries already, and might be well worth investigating more.

The problem is the incongruence of worlds. If the mind's world doesn't always match the real world, some fundamental questions are raised: Can we ever know reality fully? Do some of our philosophical problems come from this mismatch? How important is the real? What can be done to improve our intuitions and our epistemology? What are the ethical implications of this incongruence?

We live in a mental world and don't realise this. Anything we do, we base it on our knowledge, constituted in our mental representation of the external world. Anything we do is therefore grounded in a mental reality. If this mental reality is incongruent with the reality it aims to represent, many of the problems we face are not accidental, but structural. Anything we do stems from the mind – instead of relying too much on exact models of the real world, maybe we ought to focus more on the mind's reality, and explore the incongruence between the worlds.

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[6] There may be a further question, which we only mention here, briefly: Is even the "continuous reality" a proposition by the mind, and reality itself is neither discrete nor continuous, as these are mental models?