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The Truman Reality Show

What is true reality? Perhaps life is one big puppet show controlled by others for the amusement of an audience. Maybe reality and existence is merely some Deity or Deities in a “heavenly” place pulling people’s strings to amuse themselves. Is it possible that life is just an illusion put into our spiritual minds and our entire physical world is just a fabrication of some deranged entity? These are just a few of the questions that arise when trying to discern what is “Real” and what is “True”.

Rene DesCartes, a famous French philosopher from the seventeenth century, pondered this very notion in his quest to answer “What is Reality?” and “Is there a God?” DesCartes challenges his very reality by supposing that this supreme good God is not actually a Deity, “*but that some malignant demon who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful and has employed all his artifice to deceive...*” him (*Meditations* 76). Thus, DesCartes seems to feel that a Deity is merely a puppet-master meant to trick and deceive him from understanding and comprehending reality and truth. This writing is reminiscent of the Truman Show to me.

In the 1998 film, *The Truman Show*, Truman Burbank is entirely raised from birth to an adult in a filmed, controlled environment in which he believes is reality. His family, friends, co-workers and everyone else in his world are actors. This show is broadcast worldwide without his knowledge for the amusement of millions of television watchers. Every aspect of his reality is

controlled within this giant dome by the show's creator and executive producer Christof - even the weather. Confined to the small town of Seahaven, Burbank had often dreamed of far away adventures as a child. As an adult, Burbank starts to notice imperfections within his world that leads him to question his very reality, much like DesCartes did when searching for the truth to his own reality (*Meditations*). The show's writer counters Burbank's search by having his friends (paid actors) tell him that his recent discoveries are just delusions and that he is suffering from mental illness, in order to distract him from his search of true reality (Weir, *The Truman Show*).

In my younger days, long before *The Truman Show* was released, I pondered, from time to time, whether my very existence was just an illusion or possibly a tool for the entertainment of others (now known as "The Truman Show delusion (Gold et al. 460)). Would DesCartes have considered the same possibility, that his life was just some media form of entertainment if he were to have knowledge of the means of communication within our modern society? Joel and Ian Gold evaluate such possibilities in their article, *The "Truman Show" delusion: Psychosis in the Global Village*, and claim the results are:

"Delusions are both variable and stable: Particular delusional ideas are sensitive to culture, but the broad categories of delusion are stable both across time and culture. This stability has implications for the form a cognitive theory of delusion can take."

The Golds studied five subjects with "The Truman Show delusion" to reach the results mentioned above (Gold et al. 455). The Golds' results lead me to believe that DesCartes would have contemplated "The Truman Show delusion" if he had knowledge of modern western culture. Though questioning one's reality is a little different than complete psychosis, it is not far-fetched to believe one may be just an entertainment tool of some Deity, having little to no control over one's life.

In fact, one of the most intriguing ideas put forth by the Truman Show and other philosophers is the notion that perhaps free will is also an illusion. Burbank assumes that he has free will to make decisions and interact in his “reality” when both his “reality” and his “free will” are mostly illusions. Similarly, it could be true that if some Deity exists, humans are merely trapped inside their metaphysical dome of “reality” surrounded by other characters/actors and constructs of the Deity’s show. Additionally, what humans think are freely made decisions could merely be the decision that is made by the Deity – or at the very least – heavily influenced by the Deity that is “directing” our show.

Burbank does eventually find what he views as “true reality” by discovering the giant dome’s perimeter after his journey in a boat. Ironically, taking the boat trip is a challenge in itself considering he was always led to believe that his father died while in a boat, during a storm, on a fishing trip, to detour Burbank from venturing to the perimeter’s edge. Once and for all this proved his intuitions weren’t just brought on by delusions but rather his awareness of the inconsistencies within the fabricated reality he was raised in.

Unlike the Truman Show, DesCartes’ search to define “reality” and “Truth” comes to a slightly different conclusion. DesCartes is unable to prove or disprove a physical reality; however, he is certain some type of reality must exist. DesCartes knows he has thoughts; therefore, he is a thinking thing and must exist. As for the evil deceiver, DesCartes’ statement; *“Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something.”* leads me to believe that some form of reality must exist for him to exist within it (*Meditations* 79).

As mentioned earlier, I have contemplated my own reality similar to that of “The Truman Show” but was able to shrug it off on the grounds that I was being narcissistic and assuming too

much self-importance. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that my life wasn't interesting enough to pull the ratings necessary to fund such an event; therefore, I assumed that this reality must not revolve around me. I am not alone in my thoughts, either. Many people, including some of the great philosophers, have had similar concerns to mine regarding this matter. Some of whom, DesCartes and myself included, have been consumed by it at times.

Perhaps, however, the real lesson that should be taken away from philosophers and media like DesCartes, and even the Truman Show, is that one may not ever be able to fully understand and comprehend "true reality," "truth," or "existence." However, just like Burbank, the "point" of existence is to learn how to challenge our pre-conceived notions of what "reality" is. Most young people do not critically think and examine their beliefs and presuppositions of what "reality" is – they are trapped in a false sense of reality (similar to a TV show). Thus, the important lesson learned is that one should justify their reality through reasoning, logic, and find the courage to critically challenge and examine their own notions of reality and Truth.

Works Cited

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