



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## What is real? On the dematerialization of matter

Daniel Shorkend \*

*Humanities, Technion Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel.*

GSC Advanced Research and Reviews, 2022, 13(02), 103–108

Publication history: Received on 30 September 2022; revised on 01 November 2022; accepted on 04 November 2022

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/gscarr.2022.13.2.0297>

### Abstract

In this article I argue that one cannot pinpoint what is in fact real owing to the immaterial conception of matter. This argument is made possible from a scientific, philosophical, and arts-related paradigm. Whether the underlying paradigm is materialism; idealism or the creativity of the arts, it appears that one cannot say precisely what reality is and therefore have no definite sense as to what is real. This might lead to a mystical conception of matter.

**Keywords:** Reality; Matter; Art; Science; Idealism; Mysticism

### 1. Introduction

In this article, I will argue that reality as such or more precisely, matter does not exist. I will argue so from a number of perspectives: Philosophical idealism; scientific paradigms; and through an understanding of art and aesthetics. If the argument holds, then one might assert a mystical vision of reality or rather, of matter, since if matter does not essentially exist, then reality is more mental or ethereal – and thus mystical. While one might call such “matter” simply energy, words themselves are approximations or even lose their meaning. However, “energy” might be the most accurate description.

### 2. Philosophy

The question of ontology – what truly exists – and of epistemology – what can we truly know? – are perennial questions in philosophy and of course have ramifications for other modes of traditional inquiry: science; art; religion and so on.

One can find in Plato the idea that the true nature of reality consists of ideal forms and numbers. This began a trend in philosophy whereby a metaphysical substrate was postulated. Even in later Middle Ages, one can see Aquinas’s Cosmological argument as implying that finite matter is insubstantial, caused by that which transcends it and in this sense of no need for a cause, the first cause itself being uncaused and therefore not material. Later more secular variations in Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer focused more on the contents of consciousness or categories of mind as determining the nature of reality *quo mind* in contradistinction to empiricist and realist thought, namely that matter is real and substantial.

This schism between extension (matter in time and space) and consciousness (or Ideas) meant philosophy suffers from a dualism. Whereas Idealism may be said to solve that dualism by implying an underlying unity *viz-a-vie* – ideas as the only true substance, it fell into error when a) considering historical and scientific fact and b) consciousness can be reduced to the material organ known as the brain and so physicalism and materialism emerged.

\* Corresponding author: Daniel Shorkend  
Humanities, Technion Institute of Technology, Haifa, Israel.

Kant is credited as unifying the demarcation between rationalism (which is a kind of Idealism) and empiricism (the philosophical basis of scientific inquiry) by hypothesizes categories of mind that so structure and apprehend the external world. In this way, he was both able to say that reality or the external world is both filtered through the senses *and* one's mode of so structuring, evaluating and perceiving such contents. Yet, he was quick to maintain that the true nature – the Noumenal – of this external world is unknowable and shrouded in mystery. In this way, the world as phenomena might be understood and grasped in accordance with such a structuring filter or medium, call it the mind or in modern terms, simply the brain, but there is still no knowledge of reality In – itself.

In the modern era, Russel attacked Idealism and argued that it was logically flawed and with the ensuing analytic trend, metaphysics appeared to be dead and positivism the “order of the day”. Other modern philosophies such as Existentialism and Phenomenology, precede the subjectivist and relativistic approaches of post-modernist and post structural thought prevalent in Continental trends. In terms of the latter, language itself creates an impasse between self and world, as Wittgenstein had already argued – language can be thought of as a tool. In this sense, the dualistic framework persists not simply as the demarcation between consciousness (and self) and matter (or extension), but as determined by the web of language and by extension culture and its various semiotic structures.

The “older” path in (Western) philosophy works with ideas such as the soul, defined as the tabula rasa that enables one to contain reality while still being a conscious self. With the end of metaphysics and the emergence of a materialist culture, “soul” is replaced with the brain, Kant's categories of mind with psychological and social dynamics, the ghost in the machine with biology. In current times, one might say that this has evolved into questions of the nature of self and consciousness, in an age of machine learning, Artificial Intelligence and multiple identities.

Curiously though, the self caught in the “web-of-language”; in interacting in a digital world; with no absolute authority, other than the system itself and the power-structures of economics; culture and politics is such that a post-human, post-historical age with the proclamation: “no grand narratives”; has developed as an overarching paradigm (whether or not, people are aware of such). However, most of the world's population would admit to being adherents of a major religion, which by definition has an overarching paradigm or grand narrative, however modern or postmodern the world seems to have become.

The great religions: Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism's; Christianity and Islam all in highly idiosyncratic ways point to a reality that transcends the perceptual and sensual. Indeed, since nothing is substantial, nothing – no thing – is real. Yet in practice though, adherents miss the spiritual point and instead adhere to custom, convention, Institution and even power-mongering.

Philosophy itself is the analysis of thought itself. Yet it is the contents of consciousness itself that are the subject of such thought. However, how can one both analyze a thought with a thought itself which in itself needs to be analyzed? An impossible quandary for the very object is the subject and the very subject is the object.

The core of the Idealist argument though still stands irrespective of its provenance, namely that matter is some kind of construction, that its essential component is immaterial. In this vein, Leibnitz had postulated the “monad”, Schopenhauer the primacy of will, Hegel the all-inclusive absolute spirit and Nietzsche, the dance of power relations. Whatever such terminologies actually correspond to cannot be known, perhaps it is vacuous, caught in a Derridean web of language wherein nothing means anything since anything could be anything.

A simple thought experiment might illustrate the discussion so far, namely that insubstantiality of matter itself: One might apply a gestalt analysis of the “present” moment in time. I am aware of my sitting on a chair, the cool, concentrated temperature in the room; the moderate light and my typing on a computer keyboard as well as the contents of that which I type, namely the externalization of what is called thought encapsulated in propositional form as a string of words and grammatically correct sentences in English. One might ask: Is any of this real? Are not the chair, the feel of the room, namely light and temperature, and the keyboard and screen mostly empty space and the thoughts concerning such matters, arbitrary squiggles that only register as a coherent thought as a language whose form may be otherwise.

More curious is that thoughts themselves may be reduced to other fundamental causes: physics, chemistry, and biology, not to mention the social and cultural landscape. Upon immediate reflection, one is struck by the fact that one's gestalt awareness of the “now” does not really exist. One is like a springbok pursued by a lion. Initially one thinks that the “I” – the springbok exists – only to realize that it is to be consumed by a reality completely other – “a lion”. Buddhists' call the world, or might we say, the universe as samsara or delusion; Western religions might define reality as only God ((though they may differ in the definition of “God” which begs the question). Philosophy recoils into the Idealist-Realist debate. It all seems to amount to the same thing: All one has is a tacit awareness. Awareness is compounded of that which eludes

awareness. Therefore, knowledge of self and the world is impossible. Or rather: self and that which one is aware of are not real, where “real” implies “there exists”.

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### 3. Art

Let’s define art as muscular philosophy, that is, the sensual embodiment of ideas in the form of artworks (paintings, photographs, drawings, prints, sculptures, architectural design, modern new media and so on). The discipline of the history of art categorizes art as manifesting within certain historical conditions as well as in fact forming such historical epochs. Art is borne from within as well as creates the very “aesthetic” of a certain time and place, even where secular art allowed the individual greater freedom to create (or so it might seem).

This is not as abstract as it may sound: A cursory glance at history would reveal specific styles – a certain “material” culture - associated with the Great Empires: Egyptian; Classical Greece, the Roman, The Middle Ages; the Renaissance; The rise of the Modern World and the eclecticism of contemporary art. While such styles which one might simply call “aesthetics” appear to exist isolated and separate, in fact within the field of art itself, there is a continuity, such that the modern set himself the task of negating tradition and finding new modes of expression (and hence meanings).

Nevertheless, the significant point here is that in all such epochs – the structuring device of that era through its art, the very form that culture would take and said to influence, represent and form the very lifeworld itself – is in effect manifested in the art of the day. Since art is a product of the imagination, one might then say that such a life-world is arbitrarily constructed through its art: the Pharaoh is large in scale in the wall painting to indicate his divine power; the Ancient Greek statue shows perfect proportions to illustrate the harmony of mind and body; the Roman emperor venerated like a god in the form of a statue or the great gladiatorial field of battle in the form of architectural innovation reflects Rome’s power and prestige; the symbolic color of blue in the Middle Ages; the entrance into the secular domain with the innovation of perspective that would lead to science and arts’ increasing lack of service to religious institutions; the rise of modernism and eventually the abstract which denies mimetic literalness in art (and life) and the lack of a defined aesthetic in contemporary times, caught as one is in the maelstrom of the “now” itself.

The key point is that all such aesthetics do not represent or correspond to reality itself. Rather they creatively *form* such a reality and define the cultural field, the paradigm of the day. Art is like a symbol then. Yet the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans...are no longer and one can now see their art as propaganda, much like the media of today. Art shapes reality and since art is imaginative and formal, it has no base in reality and truth as such. It is a whirl of kaleidoscope and play, often violent play – consider the use of art and culture as asserting nationalist or religious dominance.

In fact, the very concept of art is an invention. Historically what we now call art was simply part of the lifeworld and did not exist as a discipline where its history and theory might be considered. It emerged in the private, individualized form today with the rise of the Enlightenment as a separate discipline and with it, the invention of the aesthetic. That is not to say there may be an inherent will to beautify; to decorate; to create, only that this may have been more integrated into life-processes itself, rather than the Enlightenment rationalism which sought to separate fields of inquiry into autonomous, pure realms.

As we know, the Enlightenment partially failed and with it the attempt to demarcate a clear definition and function for art. Notwithstanding, there has been a recent move in aesthetics, namely the “aesthetics of the everyday” that claims that aesthetics can be broadened to include all aspects of lived experience and since art is the paradigm case of the aesthetic, one might call for an art of living. This rings true, since I do not consider most examples of art to necessarily be art just because it may be a painting, sculpture, photograph and so on. The play of technique for its own sake, art for art’s sake or even art as propagating a message that is say politically motivated, may not be the deeper reason to make art. art has lost its way in the name of individualism which ironically churns out particular individuals – few artists actually know why they make what they make which I believe disqualifies such adherents as artists. In the same way, the aestheticization of the life world can only be with at least some awareness of beauty and meaning and such notions. In an age where metaphysics is all but dead, this a rarity and not the norm.

This is ironic for the great innovators of modern art with art movements such as Impressionism; Fauvism; Cubism; Non-objective art; Abstract Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism was precisely a new and creative definition of both art *and* reality. Deeper still, they each pointed to a reality that transcended the senses, was invigorated by the senses, and widened the visual scope as well as the vision for art itself – as an investigation into the true nature and structure of the perceptual datum or what we call reality compounded as it is with stuff, that is to say, matter.

The above analysis is a rather external account of art as a subject within an academic discipline. The making of art itself is an inward one of internal processes that manifests externally, but it is enmeshed with subjective experience and at its best, some kind of meaning-making or language. It may derive inspiration from nature; it may be an expression of ideas; of emotions or simply serve a larger political, cultural and historic function much as past art was said to so serve. At any rate, the language of art just as in grammatical style and method is said to embody a certain technique, a formal concern, yet is vacuous if it is only about a celebration of expertise, expunged of meaning. By meaning I do not mean the literal or representational. I find in abstract art and certainly in its genesis a return to metaphysics. One thinks of the likes of Kandinsky; Mondrian; Malevich; Rothko; Newman; Reinhardt and so on and the “Abstract” is fecund with meaning, a deeper mimesis of the ontological ground of being, Kant’s unknowable Noumenon.

Yet for all that, art is muscular philosophy so that it assumes sensual embodiment beyond the propositional and ethereal, but as a physical fact qua painting, sculpture, building...Conceptual art tries to dodge this as does Installation art in a sense as physical objects dematerialize in the service of idea. Cage’s “silence” artwork attempts the same, yet there is still some residue of the material. Nevertheless, the whole point of the argument hitherto is it is precisely through the medium of the physical that the art shines, that is to say – the less material, that of thought, emotions, and imaginings of all kinds.

The curious thing about art is that unlike propositional knowledge like say mathematics there is no singular meaning or definition attributed to a sign or symbol or image or musical arrangement - its aesthetic can assume various extra-aesthetic values or sets of correspondence. The problem usually occurs when an aesthetic is said to correspond to a particular extra aesthetic, and this is where the term “muscular philosophy” assumes significance. However, the idea of the free play of the imagination and understanding to borrow from Kant implies art is not simply a following of a logical progression of ideas and a necessary conclusion. This open-mindedness is possibly one of the more positive attributes of art – its inherent play, freedom, and multiple narratives.

Yet the cost for such fluidity and elasticity is that one cannot pinpoint the physicality of art itself; it exists as an idea, a center of energy around which meanings have been formed and certain objects assume great value, monetary and otherwise. Nietzsche suggested that life itself ought to be aesthetized and it is quite possible that if reality itself be considered some kind of installation, we do not live among objects and things, but structures; rules; conventions and ideas filtered through our subjectivities and then reacted to, communed with. We live in as stream of consciousness, and one cannot grasp the waters. It ebbs and flows. It changes, just as art seeks new forms in its creative machinery.

Whether art precedes philosophy or vice versa is not the relevant point here. Rather, one might say that just as the lifeworld emerges out of thoughts and words, so it concretizes as such through its art and material culture. In either case, it is not the “stuff” or matter that counts but the ideas, visions, feelings, and implications that such materiality embody or are said to embody applied individually and collectively. Add to this the digital revolution and indeed there is no clear-cut substantiality, no God-particle as it were, though there might be a thought of such. The thought however can be reduced to electrochemical signaling between neurons in the brain. To science I now turn. Perhaps this is where one can find substance and matter?

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#### 4. Science

The rise of science in around the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in England and France in the main grew from the Empiricist notion that we can have knowledge of the universe based on sound experimental methods and following reasoning with the language of mathematics crucial to such an understanding. The scientific method sought to expunge magic, religious traditions, and empty philosophical sophistry in favor of a robust method of inquiry that could predict what nature would do through discovery of its laws, its nature as it were.

Let us return to gestalt awareness once more: I experience tapping on the key board as various colors and orientations in space allow my fingers to depress the keys while my mind orders my fingers what to do as I formulate a meaning that devolves from this exercise of tapping or rather the idea I wish to craft is made possible by my experience of working with the glorified typewriter afforded by my senses and command of the English language.

Now, this whole experience can be reduced to electrical and chemical signaling in the brain in relation to the less intelligent atoms in the external world. I know of this external world as it is processed in the brain. What exists outside the brain? This might lead to the “brain in the vat” problem or in today’s language, a certain kind of machine programming. Yet science eschews these philosophical quandaries by simply describing the mechanism that gives rise to experience. Such a mechanism is as a result of interactions of matter, forces, fields... in time-space and can be given a quantitative, mathematical formulation. This might imply that given the correct initial conditions one could predict and

determine all future outcomes as Laplace envisioned. Such determinism is not possible on account of the enormity of the data and the fundamental indeterminism writ in nature as quantum mechanics has so theorized and experimentally verified. Yet if one peers into the king and the queen of the sciences, namely mathematics and physics respectively, one finds a lack of substantiality or materiality.

Indeed, what is a number? Does it exist? Is mathematics invented or discovered? Is not the very basis of counting flawed – how does one get from one natural number to the next considering there are infinite decimals between them? Gödel's incompleteness theorem and Russell's paradox concerning sets imply the inherent instability of the whole edifice of mathematics. If this is true, logic itself is on shaky grounds. The universe then is more like a dream or the metaphorical nature of art (with multiple meanings) or simply an Alice in Wonderland chimera where "there is no center" or so it seems, and anything might occur. The long-standing problem of induction may be added to this skepticism.

Having said that, it cannot be overlooked how science has changed the human landscape. It certainly works, regardless of how one might view it philosophically and theoretically. Advances happen almost daily, and the combined human endeavor promises a utopia if put to sound and good use. Yet clearly this is not necessarily the case and the blind, clinical adherence to science without a moral imperative and artistic impulse may turn those in the white coat to transmute into lab rats themselves, a society engineered by droids which is to create in its own image – more droids. Hence, while science may offer a way to transcend and understand nature, the humanities of which art is its chief director, also needs to be cultivated. Yet one finds more and more the Romantic vision of yesteryear becoming a technician and materialistic society in developed countries in general.

Moreover, science is not an overarching "final solution". It creates models of nature and therefore approximates the truth or is itself metaphorical just as art is. There is no known theory of everything and the physics of the subatomic and the cosmological cannot be reconciled. Our tools limit what can be perceived, and the process of data collection and analysis is slow even when computers collate the data with coding's and rules that the scientist painstakingly provides. The promise of a brave new world of new experiences that new technologies afford might lead to a descent into the loss of material reality and actual sensory connection, which will have ramifications psychologically and ethically.

Having said that, there is no doubt that the rapid growth of science not only produces new knowledge within specified domains and fields but evolves into new sub-disciplines and interdisciplinary overlaps that while might not suggest a unity since each level or field is so distinct, certainly yields some semblance of what might be termed reality. Yet, the foundation, namely physics leaves us with dots and squiggles created in fractions of a second within spaces smaller than a point of a needle and suggests – like a pointillist painting – that the universe is a conglomeration of these little machines rapped up as atoms and that these little billiard balls if that is still an accurate image, coalesce and join in various ways producing all the known chemical elements of the universe which ultimately give rise to life – and thence consciousness wherein nature contemplates nature. Thus, a self-referential paradox emerges where perhaps object and subject collide or are in dialectical symbiosis, and enlightenment may come.

Whereas philosophy exists as speculation using either the methods of propositional logic or simply creative thought, uncertain how to reconcile reason and the sensory, science offers a clear method and might be seen as an evolution of philosophy and its natural outcome. Consider that in its inception, science was called Natural Philosophy does not mean there is no further need for philosophy. Does art suffer a similar fate reduced to mere entertainment, imaginative wildness with no firm basis in truth or knowledge? In fact, there are universities where philosophy is now just called cultural studies and fine arts is simply named visual studies.

Such a disaffection for philosophy and art in favor of science is I believe an error and one which even defies science. That is, one could see philosophy as a special form of science while in its inchoate state, an inkling of a question or idea that then finds expression in the language and methods of science. Also, there are aspects of reality that are impervious to science, that while science may answer the questions concerning how something works or what something is, it is a poor candidate for questions of Existential "why's" and this is perhaps where metaphysics still has value. Moreover, science is a creative pursuit, employing aesthetic characteristics such as heurism, simplicity, beauty and pristine organization, a taming of the infinite if you like. Broadening the scope of art as hitherto argued, one might call science a kind of art, a neat aesthetics where understanding is garnered and just as art seeks to know nature so too does science. They are both products of the imagination and one is left with the same question that motivates this paper: What is reality stripped of our ways of knowing it?

The problem with a blind acceptance of science is scientism. This "ism" is narrow minded and does not do justice to the fact that science is one of many disciplines, itself subject to (a) history, subjectivity, political wrangling; and an assumption that to know is to measure. Yet, it is only one kind of knowing, rather than the only kind. Over the course of

time, the science of today may be looked upon as primitive so it would be unwise to accept as true and final the view of science in vogue today as necessarily modern and accurate. On the other hand, one would be unwise to ignore its tremendous success to date. Yet, at root, insofar as one can name things and processes, describe a particular mechanism, or predict outcomes, it is the mathematics that reigns supreme and if that is the case, then it is a relational field of variables that hold the key, not stuff, not things. Have we just reverted to Platonic idealism where numbers hold the key as fundamentally real?

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## 5. Mysticism

I found the following definition of mysticism online in the Oxford dictionary:

- Belief that union with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or the spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, may be attained through contemplation and self-surrender.
- Belief characterized by self-delusion or dreamy confusion of thought, especially when based on the assumption of occult qualities or mysterious agencies.

I think such a definition captures several important concepts: a) That if one cannot say what is real when attributed to something finite as one might say nature is *quo reality*, then one could postulate a Creator, the Deity as being the essential reality behind all reality. Furthermore, that there is a method whereby one can communicate with such a Deity.

However, it precisely the secularization of art and the rise of science that questions such an assertion and thence traditional religion, and hence one might derive the second definition of the term, “mysticism”.

To circumvent the confusion of the term “Creator” or “Deity” and the thwarting of the search for real causes in nature or for the freedom in the arts via notions of the occult and the irrational or mysterious that usually figure in faith-based religions, one might borrow from science the concept of “energy”. A term less loaded than one’s with a fierce religious connotation and able to morph in various forms in domains as various as philosophy, art, science, and mysticism itself, one might conjecture that this energy is the fundamental description of reality.

Of course, a word by itself is meaningless unless “stretched” or explained further, in which case one might characterize this energy as having quantifiable and qualitative attributes. Energy encompasses light and dark quite literally, matter (particle) and space-time, temperature, force, field, dimensions – the relationship between variables described mathematically and suggests other worlds with other physical properties. Is there a metaphysical substrate that can be quantized as energy? Since it is meta – physical, then no, but it can be thought of and felt and characterized qualitatively. It is this dimension that the mystic can access and have knowledge of.

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## 6. Conclusion

If there is a portal to this metaphysical dimension, the substrate of existence, the truly real through mystical experience, then art, philosophy and science are ladders to get there, not hinderances.

Art teaches that there is more to reality than meets the eye or rather cultivates the eye to see more and deeper yet, it may enhance the inner eye, one’s vision to perceive beyond the literal and commonplace. Science too trains one to see deeper within the world of phenomena and abstract causes not readily known and understood. Science trains the mind to combine empirical reality and logical thinking in order to explain and have knowledge of the world around one, gain a deeper perspective than simply seeing things as inert, dumb, and simply physical, lacking some kind of consciousness or intelligence. Philosophy may exist as a realm of contemplation preceding exact and coherent knowledge, but is the epicenter of new ideas and concepts, reinvigorating the exact sciences and the arts, the discipline of disciplines while itself being a discipline. In conclusion, this brief paper has outlined reasons for believing that one cannot say what is real or true or absolute when considering finite bits of matter, if indeed matter itself exists. We have found that art, philosophy, and science might lead to mysticism and that “energy” was perhaps an apt word to express the concept of the “fundamental stuff”, divorced from religious connotations which are simply a matter of belief since mystical communion is a kind of knowledge or experience and not simply reduced to a lazy denial of science, art and philosophy in the name of mysterious, occult forces. What then is real? Energy. What is energy? That which asks the very question.