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Roll Your Own Reality

By Larry G. Johnson

There was a time when “crazy” was defined as “being out of touch with reality.” But in an age of “fake news,” “virtual” reality and “artificial” intelligence, you may ask yourself, “What is real anymore?”

Plato and Jung thought reality was something ideal and objective outside of ourselves that guided our experiences of the world. On the other hand, postmodernists claim there is no reality other than the one each of us invents for ourselves; nobody has the authority to claim a superior version.

But physicists do the philosophers one better with the concept of a “multiverse” or “meta-universe.” There are, besides the universe that includes our little planet, 10 or 11 space-time dimensions besides our own. Their existence is required to fully explain all the physical laws and the constants used to describe them.¹

But with all these parallel universes, do they all share a common “reality?” Or are there places where red is green and apples are oranges? Whether we will ever fully fathom any of this, one thing is certain: Mankind has proven itself enthusiastic in finding ways to escape reality to avoid its harshness — or boredom.

The consequences could be dire for the survival of our civilization and for our legal system that serves as its first line of defense. Just count the ways:

Drugs

One way to avoid the rigors of the real world is to obliterate your awareness of it. During the last election cycle, many people were surprised to learn that in supposedly idyllic rural communities in places such as Vermont and New Hamp-

shire, addiction to opioids had reached epidemic proportions.

But the problem is everywhere and vast. A whopping 38 percent of U.S. adults were prescribed opioids in 2015,² and the percentage has undoubtedly increased since then. Are all of these patients in real pain or just bored out of their minds?

Sex

Sex robots are becoming a major economic growth sector, particularly in China where the “one child” policy led to a disproportionate number of boys being born, or rather allowed to be born, over girls. Sex robots are increasingly becoming substitutes for human females there, as elsewhere, with customers paying as much as \$6,000 for top-of-the-line models that “learn” what the owner likes, and the dolls can even sing to the owner.³

Feminists have long complained about males’ objectification of women’s bodies, but now it looks like some men are going straight for the objects. The reality of dating, marrying, raising children together, forming lasting partnerships — hey, that’s just way too hard.

A subsidiary business stemming from the sex-robot trade is also on the rise: sex-doll brothels.⁴ But look on the bright side: with that, there is less venereal disease, less exploitation of women, less sex-trafficking slavery, and, perhaps, less rape.

Money

What is a dollar, really? It used to be backed by gold, but Nixon ended that in 1971. Now it is like all the other fiat currencies — a piece of paper or chunk of metal with art work and numbers on it. It is valuable only so long as people believe in it, very much like a shared religion.

But given the way the Fed plays with the money supply and debt, many smart people are hedging their savings with “cryptocurrencies” such as Bitcoin that are very hard, or some say, impossible, to tamper with. Bitcoin is just one of many of its kind. There are over 900 of these invented forms of money currently being traded against each other and traditional national currencies.⁵

Where can you go to stash some of these cyber coins in your pocket? Nowhere! You can buy “physical Bitcoins,” but they are simply cute, casino chip-like plastic containers within which the digital codes — the actual Bitcoins — are embedded on a computer chip.

But then again, what is your bank savings account other than some 1s and 0s on a computer somewhere? Is it not all that different from Bitcoins?

Machines, the No-Wage Workers

The fight for minimum wages may evaporate entirely as in industry after industry humans are being replaced by “artificial” workers that can be reliably counted on to work 24/7, without lunch, rest or smoke breaks, and with nary an HR problem.

One of the biggest U.S. workforce sectors, that of food servers and bartenders, is being severely eroded as robots come on line, programmed with cute humanoid features to make them entertaining.

Every form of human work is susceptible to replacement by robots. For example, Sweden has just introduced a 24/7 humanoid bank teller that can not only answer just about any question about your account, but “she” also does so with a pleasant and believable personality.⁶

Entertainment

We used to have Game Boys or Walkmans, cute little devices that gave us some fun whenever we needed a distraction. But now we have smartphones with all their instant communication apps, omnivorous social media and interactive games. Smartphones have turned us into a species whose thumbs and downward-pointing heads will evolve as dominant features as we better adapt to our 24/7 addictions to self.

The future: a device-free life where you can remain perpetually in a holographic world of your own creation, a “real cloud” you insert yourself in where you can be one of the actors in “The Game of Thrones,” for example, rather than just a spectator.⁷

Doomsday

But nothing says anti-reality like the various scenarios where we become Dr. Frankenstein to the robot monsters we are now so joyously inventing. At first, the robots will “improve” our lives, but it will not take them long before they take over our lives completely. They will kill us, make us pets or put us in their own video games. And when that happens, they will be smart enough to make us think we are still in control.

Will all our clever technologies be our ultimate undoing? Elon Musk, creator of the electric Tesla car, thinks so. He has been having an ongoing, spirited

debate with Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook, over this existential question.

Musk makes the logical argument that once our techno-creatures become vastly smarter than us, we will be at their mercy. Looking at the rest of nature and history, dominant species have always exploited or eliminated lesser ones. That is an ineluctable fact.

Zuckerberg (whose name in German means “Sugar Mountain,” appropriate for his optimism) thinks humans who create the software to command the robots will always have the upper hand. But he had a rather stark comeuppance a few weeks ago when he had to have his company shut down two robots that began communicating to each other in a language *only they understood*.⁸ How does Zuckerberg explain that?

To all of this there may be a silver lining. If humanity comes to a point where each person can create a unique world to live in with everything he/she wants, then that would seem to eliminate most causes for conflict. We will become too busy with ourselves, our fake friends and our fake world to care about anything else. Billions of autonomous worlds will live blissfully unaware of one another.

Maybe that will give our species another millennium or two of survival. ■

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Technology Section. Besides being a litigator, for the past 20 years he has served as a consultant and expert witness in e-discovery matters. He is the founder of E-Discovery ADR (www.esi-adr.com), serving as joint expert, mediator and special master in e-discovery matters.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiverse>

² https://ca.news.yahoo.com/more-third-us-adults-prescribed-opioids-2015-102126736.html?soc_src=social-sh&soc_trk=ma

³ <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/634004/porn-star-asa-akira-sex-robot-asa-takigami-abyss-creations-wicked-real-doll>

⁴ “From doll brothels to ‘robotic rape,’ the rise of sex robots raises ethical and legal dilemmas.” <http://nationalpost.com/news/world/from-doll-brothels-to-robotic-rape-the-rise-of-sex-robots-raises-ethical-and-legal-dilemmas/wcm/57156ad1-a36d-4b9c-8c67-cf66d83f43c7>

⁵ https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cryptocurrencies

⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-07-30/your-banker-is-always-in-sweden-rolls-out-the-robots>. See also my article in the Bar Bulletin February 2017 issue, “When Will a Robot Replace You?” at <https://www.kcba.org/kcba/news/events/barbulletin/BView.aspx?Month=02&Year=2017&AID=article6.htm>.

⁷ **Editor’s Note:** I recently read a very forward-thinking — and when you think about it, scary — short story contained in a science fiction compendium from the 1990s (it was an old paperback I picked up for a dollar at Half-Price Books). The main character, along with many others of his ilk, spent most of his “real” time in a porta-potty, hooked up to a glucose drip, so he would not starve to death, while he spent days at a time living in a “virtual reality” world of his own making.

⁸ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/tech/4141624/facebook-robots-speak-in-their-own-language/>. **Editor’s Note:** Stephen Hawking is very concerned about AI, for a very good reason: <http://www.newsweek.com/stephen-hawking-warns-artificial-intelligence-could-end-humanity-332082>. And does anyone still remember HAL from “2001: A Space Odyssey?”