

00:05

In the next few minutes, I hope to change the way you think about the very nature of reality itself. I'm not a physicist, and I'm not a philosopher. I'm a historian. And after studying the ancient Greeks and many other premodern peoples for more than 20 years as a professional, I've become convinced that they all lived in real worlds very different from our own.

00:30

Now, of course, you and I here today, we take it for granted that there's just one ultimate reality out there -- our reality, a fixed universal world of experience ruled by timeless laws of science and nature. But I want you to see things differently. I want you to see that humans have always lived in a pluriverse of many different worlds, not in a universe of just one. And if you're willing to see this pluriverse of many worlds, it will fundamentally change, I hope, the way you think about the human past and hopefully the present and the future as well.

01:13

Now, let's get started by asking three basic questions about the contents of our reality, the real world that you and I share right here, right now. First of all: What is it that makes something real in our real world? Well, for us, real things are material things, things made of matter that we can somehow see, like atoms, people, trees, mountains, planets ... By the same token, invisible, immaterial things -- like gods and demons, heavens and hells -- these are considered unreal. They're simply beliefs, subjective ideas that exist only in the realm of the mind. To be real, a thing must exist objectively, in some visible material form, whether our minds can perceive it or not.

02:12

Second: What are the most important things in our real world? Answer: human things -- people, cities, societies, cultures, government, economies. Why is this? Well, because we humans think we're special. We think we're the only creatures on the planet who have things like language, reason, free will. By contrast, nonhuman things, to us, are just part of nature, a mere backdrop to human culture, a mere environment of things that we feel entitled to use however we want.

02:53

And third: What does it mean to be a human in our real world? Well, it means being an individual, a person who lives ultimately for oneself. We think nature has made us this way, giving each and every one of us all of the reason, the right, the freedom and the self-interest to thrive and compete with other individuals for all of life's important resources.

03:25

But I'm suggesting to you that this real world of ours is neither timeless nor universal. It's just one of countless different real worlds that humans have experienced in history. What, then, would another world look like? Well, let's look at one, the real world of the classical Athenians in ancient Greece.

03:48

Now, of course, we usually know the Athenians as our cultural ancestors, pioneers of our Western traditions, philosophy, democracy, drama and so forth. But their real world was nothing like our own. The real world of the Athenians was alive with things that we would consider immaterial and thus unreal. It pulsed with things like gods, spirits, nymphs, Fates, curses, oaths, souls and all kinds of mysterious energies and magical forces. Indeed the most important things in their real world were not humans at all, but gods. Why? Because gods were awesome -- literally. They controlled all the things that made life possible: sunshine, rainfall, crop harvests, childbirth, personal health, family wealth, sea voyages, battlefield victories. There were over 200 gods in Athens, and they were not remote, detached divinities watching over human affairs from afar. They were really there, immediately there in experience, living in temples, attending sacrifices, mingling with the Athenians at their festivals, banquets and dances.

05:13

And in the real world of the Athenians, humans did not live apart from nature. Their lives were dictated by the rhythms of the seasons and by the life cycles of crops and animals. Indeed the land of the Athenians itself was not just a piece of property or territory. It was a goddess, a living goddess that had once given birth to the first Athenians and had nurtured and cared for all of their descendants ever since, with her precious gifts of soils, water, stone and crops. Indeed, if anything should pollute her soils with unlawful bloodshed, it had to be expelled immediately, beyond her boundaries, whether it was a man, an animal or just a fallen roof tile.

06:02

And in the real world of the Athenians, there were no individuals. All Athenians were inseparable from their families, and all Athenian families were expected to live together and work together as a single body, like cells of a living organism. They called this social body simply "demos," the people, and they called their way of life "demokratia," but it was nothing like our modern democracy, because Athenians were not born to be individuals living for themselves. They were born to serve and preserve the families and the social body that had given them life in the first place.

06:48

In sum, the whole Athenian way of being human was radically different from our own. Nature had programmed them to live as one, as a unitary social body, and it had designed them expressly to coexist and collaborate with all manner of nonhuman beings, especially their 200 gods and their divine earth mother. Life in Athens was thus sustained by what we can call a "cosmic ecology," a symbiotic ecology of gods, motherland and people.

07:25

Now, of course, to us today in our real world, we look at their real world and, well, it looks strange, weird, bizarre, exotic and, of course, unreal. But it has many major things in common with the real world experienced by numerous other premodern peoples, including, for example, the ancient Egyptians, ancient Chinese and the peoples of precolonial Peru, Mexico, India, Bali, Hawaii. In all of those premodern real worlds, gods controlled all of the conditions of existence. Nonhumans were always expected to collaborate with humans and vice versa. And humans were expected to serve their communities, not to live for themselves as individuals.

08:20

Indeed, in the grand scheme of history, it's our real world, our reality, that is the great exception to the rule -- the exotic one, the strange one. Only in our real world is reality itself a purely material order. Only in our real world are nonhumans always subordinate to humans. And only in our real world are humans born to be individuals. Why this uniqueness? Well, because our real world was shaped and forged in a unique environment, a historically unprecedented environment in early modern Europe, with its scientific revolution, its enlightenment, its novel, experimental, capitalist way of life.

09:10

Yet, despite this uniqueness, we just take it for granted that our reality is the one true reality, that all humans in history have lived in only our real world, whether they knew it or not. And just think for a moment of the colossal arrogance of this assumption. Basically, we're saying, "We modern Westerners are right about reality, and everybody else in all of history is wrong." Basically, we're saying that all of those extraordinary civilizations of the past were really just lucky accidents, because they were all founded on nothing more than myths, illusions and false ideas about reality.

09:56

Why are we so certain that we're right? Why do we just take it for granted that we know more? Why do we struggle to take seriously the real worlds of premodern peoples? Well, because we think our modern sciences provide the only truly objective knowledge of reality. But do they?

10:20

For more than a hundred years now, the very idea of an objective reality has been seriously and continually questioned by experts in many different fields, from physics and biology to philosophy. Basically, these experts would suggest that reality is not simply a material order given to us by nature. It is something that humans actively participate in producing when their minds interact with their environment.

10:50

Here's a way to think about it. In order to make sense of experience, every people in the past, in effect, had to devise a model of the real world. They would then use that model as the basis for their whole way of life, all of its practices, its norms, its values. And if that way of life proved to be successful in practice, sustainable, then the truth of the model would be confirmed by the evidence of everyday experience: "It works!" And thus, once the model became internalized in mind and baked into the environment, the effect of a stable real world would be generated by ongoing interactions between the two, between minds on the one hand, environments on the other.

11:42

Let's take a quick example. Why are we so convinced in our modern world that we're all, ultimately, natural individuals? Well, because a bunch of social scientists in early modern Europe decided that we were, and because their model of a world full of natural competitive individuals became the basis for a new, capitalist way of life that generated unprecedented levels of wealth -- at least for the lucky few -- and because all of us who've been raised in capitalist nations ever since have been continually socialized to be individuals by our families, our schools and our societies, and because we are treated precisely as individuals almost every day of our lives by the structures which control those lives, like our liberal democracy and our capitalist economy. In other words, our minds and our environment continually conspire to make our individuality seem entirely natural.

12:47

In sum: no human being has ever experienced a truly objective reality. Different peoples have always experienced different realities, each one shaped by whatever model of the world happened to be embedded in minds and environment at the time. In other words, humans have always lived in a pluriverse of many different real worlds, not in a universe of just one. Let me close with three thoughts that follow from this conclusion.

13:22

First of all, we modern Westerners need to stop thinking that all premodern peoples are somehow more primitive or less enlightened than ourselves. Their real world, with all their gods and magical forces, were just as real as our own. Indeed, those real worlds anchored ways of life that sustained the lives of multitudes for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years. Their real worlds were different; they were not wrong.

13:56

Second: we modern Westerners need to get over ourselves.

14:01

(Laughter)

14:03

We need to be a little more humble. For all of its extraordinary technological accomplishments, our brave new modern real world has imperiled the whole future of the planet in barely 300 years. It's made possible all manner of historical horrors: genocides across entire continents, mass exploitation of colonized peoples, industrial servitude, two disastrous world wars, the Holocaust, nuclear warfare, species extinctions, environmental degradation, factory farming and, of course, global warming. The evidence is there if you want to see it. Our model of reality has failed catastrophically in practice.

14:52

Third: other models and other real worlds are possible. Other worlds are being lived right now, as we speak, in what remains of history's pluriverse, in places like Amazonia, the Andes, Southern Mexico, Northern Canada, Australia and all the other places where Indigenous peoples are struggling to preserve their highly sustainable ancestral ways of life to prevent them being

destroyed by modernity's ever-expanding universe. I suggest that all of these nonmodern peoples past and present have so much to teach us about living more sustainable lives in other possible worlds.

15:44

So let's start right now to try to learn from them before it's too late. Let's try to magnify our imaginations. Let's start to imagine other possible ways of being human in other possible worlds.

16:03

Thank you.

16:04

(Applause and cheers)