

## What Is Reality? Why You Should Care

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When people tell you to do a reality check, there's more to what they say than the words. Learn what's behind it, what they really want. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

I've wrestled with reality for 35 years, Doctor, and I'm happy to state I finally won out over it.  
- Jimmy Stewart in *Harvey*, 1950

In the movie, *Harvey* was a giant, man-sized rabbit that could be seen only by Jimmy Stewart's character. *Harvey* was either a figment of Jimmy's character's insane imagination (as his opponents tried to prove) or something supernatural, which no one but the lead character seemed prepared to accept.

Let's take a close look at that quote. Wrestling with reality is something we all do on a daily basis. It's what life is, most of the time.

But what is reality? What does it mean to you?

I submit that "reality" as a concept is something others use to help us define our behaviour as either acceptable or unacceptable. "Get real" and "Do a reality check" are examples of how others use the concept of reality to get us to alter our behaviour to bring it in line with what they want and believe.

Or reality is what we submit to because it's too hard to wrestle with it until we have subdued it. When we give up and act like everyone else, we have given in to "reality," meaning that we have accepted that following the crowd is the only worthy route to take in life.

Are those kinds of realities worthy of our devoting our lives to them? Remember, the people who want us to do those reality checks have something to gain by our behaving the way they would like. That gain may be nothing more than getting us to do what they want. Yet that gives them power over us. The reality behind that reality is that by behaving the way these people want we have granted them some power over our life.

As a young man going to university, I worked in the summers at a meat packing company that operated slaughterhouses. I learned about the flocks of sheep that would follow one goat, without thinking, into the funnel track that would be their last expression of life. (The goat always walked through to lead another flock later.)

The concept of sheep following a leader to their deaths earned a special place in my life as a result of that experience. Seeing people blindly and willingly follow some leader into self destruction raises my anger at the association. Wanting someone to "accept reality" is a way to manipulate that person into doing what you believe he or she should. It's not persuasion by reasoned argument so much as coercion by emotional argument.

If we must wrestle with reality, we must grapple with someone else's reality, what someone else wants, not what we want ourselves. Of course we can persuade ourselves that "reality" is what we wanted after all, but it may not have been that way. Most of us do that. Most of us act the way others around us want us to act.

And that's just fine. Sheep are fundamentally happy animals, even as they enter that funnel in their final moments.

Sheep accept the reality offered by others. They believe it's the only way to go. It's their reality.

Bill Allin

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Author: builder

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