

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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familycourtguy@gmail.com www.KilroyCafe.com



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Theory meets Reality and... **CRASH!**

By GLENN CAMPBELL

Reality is big, really big. Just when you think you have it all worked out, reality throws you a curveball that says, “You don’t know nuthin’, buddy!”

Reality is so big that there’s no way us puny little humans can grasp it all at once. There’s just too much data for our tiny skulls to hold. Instead, we come up with simplified *theories* about reality that each try to capture some aspect of it; then we behave as though those theories were true.

Liberalism is a theory. So is conservatism. Love is a theory—a wonderfully messy speculation on what someone else may or may not feel. All religions are theories, unless you happen to be the Supreme Being Himself. Gravity is a theory—and a damn fine one I might add! It’s the theory that keeps you from walking off cliffs thinking you can fly.

All theories are just that—theories. They are simplistic models of reality that try to capture a tiny slice of it for a particular purpose. No theory is good forever. There will always come a point in its life when it is going to mislead you.

It is okay to follow a certain theory for now, if it is the best one you currently have access to, but it’s a mistake to think this theory will always be the best, because that’s when reality sneaks up and bites you.

There is an element of faith in every theory—some key assumption that we don’t really understand but that we believe will always be there because it has always been there in the past. Take gravity—a damn fine theory, as I said.

Reality always wins.

“What goes up, must come down,” is going to save your butt on any number of occasions. But no one really knows where gravity comes from, and therein lies the sort of loophole that reality is eventually going to use to make a fool of you.

Newton expanded our theory of gravity, and Einstein came up with a new theory of physics that frames gravity in a whole different way, but it’s funny how each new theory ends up raising more questions than answers. There seems to be no endpoint to the investigation, no place where we can say we’ve obtained perfect knowledge.

Which is all to say, “Have some humility, man!” Whatever your theory about reality may be, you’ve got to understand it’s a stop-gap measure, a thumbnail sketch. Reality is way big, and you shouldn’t go around claiming you’re God and have it all figured out.

People do that all the time. They think they’ve come up with the perfect theory, so they commit to it always being true by signing various kinds of long-term contracts based on that theory.

How about this one: “Real estate is the only investment that always appreciates, never depreciates.” How many people have been suckered by that theory and are now paying for it?

A theory might be good enough for now, but over time every theory is going to start diverging from reality. And I

mean EVERY theory. It’s not that the theory necessarily becomes ineffective within the framework it was designed for, but over time the whole framework tends to shift. The underlying assumptions about life that you built your original models upon are bound to change. That’s called “growth.”

What do most people do when their theory starts conflicting with the hard evidence of reality? If they have already committed themselves to their theory, to the point where changing it would be unbearably painful, they’re going to start fudging reality instead.

In other words, when evidence starts leaking in that your investments might be misguided, it seems a lot easier to kill the messenger than to revise the theory. Over the course of their lives, people fudge reality, and fudge it some more, and as they do their universe becomes smaller and smaller, because looking outward just reveals more disturbing evidence. Personal growth slows to a crawl.

If you stop listening to reality, one of two things is going to eventually happen: (1) You will die before reality catches up with you, or (2) reality will get the last laugh by calling in a catastrophe to even the score.

THEN you’ll revise your theory!

—G.C.

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