

# Why Ice Cream is an Absolute Good

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Peculiar vs General

Reality vs ?

These are the ideas that stood out to me while reading Stevens' poems.

Seeing these ideas juxtaposed to each other, I cannot help but ask "Is reality peculiar or general?"

Then, it seems inevitable that I should ask the reciprocal, "Is 'the peculiar' reality or is 'the general' reality?"

Finally, a question Stevens asks himself, "Is the poem both peculiar and general?" (Notes toward a supreme fiction: It must change, Section IX)

In the rest of the paper, I will try to give my best guess on how Stevens would answer these questions.

At the core of these questions seems to be another set of questions:

Is there a counterpart of reality?

We use words such as 'real' or 'unreal,' yet we never use the word 'unreality' or 'non-reality' or 'areality'.

Can anything be outside of reality?

If there is no counterpart, the second question becomes easy to answer.

Both are reality because nothing can not be a part of reality.

The first question, on the other hand, becomes meaningless.

Something is peculiar if it is different in some way from the norm.

Something is general if it is similar to the norm.

Unfortunately, in the model of a reality without a counterpart, there can be no norm.

There is only a singular reality.

However, is this model of reality coherent with the ideas conveyed by Stevens' poem?

Let's examine "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" Section XXVIII to get an idea of Stevens' perspective.

The section begins with these lines:

"If it should be true that reality exists

In the mind: ...

it follows that

Real and unreal are two in one:"

There are two ways to interpret these lines.

One way is to interpret these lines from a strictly empiricist viewpoint.

To a strict empiricist, our perception is the only reality because there is no way to verify the "realness" of anything outside of our perception.

As such, the first line can be rewritten as,

“If it should be true that reality ONLY exists

In the mind: ...”

This keyword “only” hints to us that this view follows the model of a singular reality without a counterpart.

If so, “real and unreal are two in one:” seems to mean that our perceptions can be seen as both real and unreal.

How could this be?

We know for sure that perception is reality for an empiricist so it is clear that perceptions are real.

However, perceptions, under a strict empiricist view, can never be verified.

There is no way for me to prove to you that this paper I wrote is real.

In fact, there is no way to prove to myself that my experience of writing this paper is real.

In this sense, perceptions are unreal.

There are two implications from this perspective.

First, because the only real thing in our life is also unreal, it seems that the boundaries between real and unreal are muddled.

In fact, it almost seems like the distinction of real and unreal itself becomes meaningless;

the strict empiricist should not care that they cannot verify their perceptions, because it is impossible to do so in the first place.

As such, it does not matter if my perception is real or not.

This once again supports the idea that under this perspective, there is no counterpart to “reality.” (which may be a misnomer since the “realness” is actually meaningless)

Second, following the logic from before, the distinction of peculiar and general also becomes meaningless.

If my perception is the only “reality,” it can neither be peculiar or general.

The second interpretation takes a similar approach in granting our perceptions the status of “reality” but unlike before, it does not do so by stripping this status from everything else.

As such, the first part can be rewritten as,

"If it should be true that reality CAN exist

In the mind: ...”

Like before, the keyword “can” reveals quite a bit, mainly that the reality referred to here is not singular.

If we say that reality CAN exist in the mind, it is assumed that there is a reality that exists outside of the mind.

Since this viewpoint posits that reality can also exist in the mind, there seems to be two different instances of reality.

Although we cannot say that these instances are counterparts with just the first half of these lines, under this perspective, the remaining half seems to argue that they are in fact counterparts.

Considering that it is assumed that there is a reality that exists outside of and independent of

the mind, it seems natural that this reality should be the “real”.

Then, it follows that the reality in our mind is the “unreal.”

So why would the reality in our mind be “unreal”?

One way to answer this is by examining how the real interact with the unreal.

As we live, we experience the “real.”

I see the real computer in front of me.

You read these real words that are written on a real screen/paper.

The “real” leaves an imprint on our mind.

Even when I stop looking at my computer, I can still think of the computer.

There is an image or thought in my mind that is associated with the real computer.

Then it seems that there is a representation of the “real” in my mind that exists even when the perception of the “real” is gone.

This simulacrum (a replica without the original) is not the same as the “real” yet it exists independently of the “real”.

I believe that it is in this sense that the reality in our mind can be considered to be “unreal”.

It is not the “real”, but the reality of these simulacra cannot be denied;

It is the “unreal” reality.

The implications of this are starkly different from the previous interpretation.

First, the distinction between “real” and “unreal” is important because they represent two very different things.

Because of this, the distinction between peculiar and general is also very clear.

The “real” can be experienced by anyone and as such, it represents the general.

The “unreal” only exists in each person’s mind and as such, it is the peculiar.

So which interpretation did Stevens intend?

I believe that this can be answered by answering the question Stevens asks in “Notes toward a supreme fiction”: It must change, Section IX, “Is the poem both peculiar and general?”

Like before, this line has two interpretations:

“Is the poem somehow both peculiar and general?”

Or

“Is the poem both peculiar and general because that distinction is meaningless?”

The first follows the logic of a plural reality while the second assumes a singular reality.

Luckily, I believe that Stevens provides all the clues necessary to understand which interpretation he believes in when, later in the poem, he writes,

“He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general.”

In order for Stevens to intend a lack of distinction between the peculiar and the general, the line should mean the same thing even if we randomly choose between peculiar and general.

It would look something like this:

“He tries by a (peculiar/general) speech to speak

the (peculiar/general) potency of the (peculiar/general).”

Whatever combination we choose, the meaning should be the same.

However, I think that it is clear that it is not.

Think of these two different combinations:

“He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general.”

and

“He tries by a general speech to speak

The general potency of the peculiar”

To me, the images that these two combinations create in my mind are very different.

If the same holds for you, then it seems clear that Stevens believes in a plural reality that exists both in and out of our minds.

One interesting aspect of Stevens’ account of reality is that his distinction between “real” and “unreal” does not necessarily imply a hierarchy.

Often, we consider the “real” to be better to the “unreal”.

However, in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” Section IX, Stevens writes, “We seek the poem of pure reality”.

Nowhere does he say that we seek the “real” reality.

Throughout his poem, the nuance seems to be that the “real” and “unreal” are simply different forms of reality that cannot be ranked.

So, which of the two realities is the “pure” reality?

My hypothesis is neither.

One way we can interpret the “pure reality” is by replacing “reality” with “existence”.

If you think that this replacement is illogical or arbitrary, you need not read further; however, considering that Stevens believes in both a “real” reality and an “unreal” reality, I do not think that “realness” is an important factor in measuring purity.

As such, I tried using a word with a similar to almost identical meaning that doesn’t have the word “real” in it.

A “pure existence” is easier to understand.

One interpretation of a “pure existence” is an existence that cannot be faltered, an existence that is self-sufficient or self-justifying.

Unfortunately, neither the “real” nor the “unreal” reality meet this requirement by themselves.

The “unreal” cannot come to be without the “real” and the “real” cannot be proven to be existing without our perception.

However, I think that there is one way to achieve this “pure existence”.

Imagine that the “real” reality and the “unreal” reality coincide or are equal.

The “real” imprints the “unreal” in the mind.

Simultaneously, the mind uses the “unreal” and matches it with the “real” it perceives,



confirming the “real”.

It seems then, that the “real” and “unreal” create a sort of harmony or loop where each reality plays an integral part for the existence of the other reality.

If this is achieved, this system of realities is self-sufficient and self-justifying.

If this is achieved, this would be the “purest existence”.

As such, I believe that Stevens’ idea of “the poem of pure reality” is a poem where the “real” and the “unreal” coincide.

So what would such a poem look like?

Another way to state “the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal’ coincide” is to say that “the ‘peculiar’ and the ‘general’ coincide.”

Let’s examine what the “peculiar” and the “general” are for a poem by looking at the beginning part of “Notes toward a supreme fiction”: It must change, Section IX.

It goes as such,

"The poem goes from the poet's gibberish to

The gibberish of the vulgate and back again."

In interpreting these lines, I think it is clear that the first instance of the poem as “the poet’s gibberish” is different from the second.

Whatever the poet intends, it cannot be exactly the same as what the reader reads.

If this is true, it seems that Stevens is saying that the readers are, in some way, a poet.

However, considering that poets are often required to create something, what could the reader be creating?

I believe this can be explained if we reimagine what Stevens means by "gibberish."

Let's say instead of actual words, "gibberish" means something incomprehensible, perhaps the sensation of an image or a thought not yet formulized into words.

Under this description, "the poet's gibberish" will be the ideas or the images the poet is thinking about, not yet expressed.

Consequently, it seems that "gibberish of the vulgate" would mean language itself.

Language is simply an agreement to assign certain sounds or symbols with certain meanings.

To a person outside of the language, everything is simply "gibberish."

As such, it seems plausible to understand "gibberish of the vulgate" as a shared language (not specifically language of the common people).

If we agree with everything so far, it seems that the final "poet's gibberish" would be the thoughts or the images brought into mind by the reader, not entirely formulized into words.

Under this description, attributing the title of a "poet" to the reader seems appropriate because they are the ones who are conjuring the images and thoughts.

Even with the same poem, each reader will interpret the "gibberish of the vulgate" with their own images and thoughts.

In this way, the reader is creating a new interpretation of the poem for themselves that cannot be shared by anyone.

In fact, this description would serve as an appropriate answer to the question, "Is the poem both peculiar and general?"

The poem starts off as something peculiar, an idea in the original poet's mind.

However, in expressing this idea, the poet is forced to use language.

As such, they must generalize their original thought.

If I thought of a very specific tree, I am forced to use the word "tree."

I might add descriptions through adjectives but all of those words will have slightly different meanings or images for everyone, meaning it is impossible to fully and accurately convey the exact tree I thought of.

In fact, I would argue that the context of the image in my mind is also a relevant attribute to the image, but surely the full context of the image, its location in space-time or the proceeding and following events, cannot be fully expressed.

However, in interpreting the generalized idea, the reader uses their own thoughts and images.

This results in the reader's own "peculiar" conception of the poem.

As such, the poem, in different stages are both general and peculiar.

In this sense, the "peculiar" of a poem will be the poet's ideas, yet to be put in words.

The "general" of a poem will be the words that is used to express these ideas.

With this conception of the "peculiar" and the "general" of a poem, I think it becomes clear why Stevens favors his poem "The Emperor of Ice-cream".

Stevens said that this poem "represented what was in [his] mind at the moment, with the least possible manipulation."

For Stevens, "The Emperor of Ice-cream" is the poem where the "peculiar" and the "general"

coincide the most.

“The Emperor of Ice-cream” is the poem where the “real” reality of the outside world and the “unreal” reality of his mind are one and the same.

In this way, “The Emperor of Ice-cream” is the poem of “purest” reality.

It seems that ice cream is truly an absolute good.