



On Reality

What is reality? Reality is what really is. It is what the universe that we exist in actually is. In psychology we use a term called “reality testing” which means testing a persons ability to understand events in their lives without violating certain basic universal rules of physics. Reality testing includes at least the ability to explain events with an understanding of what common knowledge or common sense would suggest to most of us. Reality testing involves the capacity to step back from our immediate belief about “reality” and observe it more dispassionately and logically.

There are several fundamental ways that basic reality testing can break down in humans. First we need to be able to differentiate between what is happening outside of our head from what is happening inside our head. Outside of our head includes sensations coming from our body into our head. This sounds quite simple at first. However almost all of us have had dreams where we were unable to determine in the dream whether we were dreaming or not. When we awaken with either relief or sadness depending on the content of the dream we are sometimes surprised to discover that what we thought had happened “in reality” turned out to be a dream in our head. Some people even believe that what happens in a dream is actually happening concretely somewhere in reality! From a scientific point of view this is rarely true. There are two important boundaries to consider regarding reality and reality testing. The first is the boundary between what is happening in our mind and what is happening outside of our mind and outside of our body. This boundary involves reality testing. The second boundary is the boundary between what is happening in our conscious mind and what is happening in our unconscious mind. This boundary is called the repression barrier. The repression barrier is the boundary between our combined conscious mind and pre-conscious mind that together are on one side of the repression barrier. Our unconscious mind is on the other side of the repression barrier.

The pre-conscious part of our mind is that part that can be made conscious by shifting our attention towards it such as thinking about what we plan or hope to do tonight. Before this was mentioned most of you reading this were not thinking about later tonight but are now. Those thoughts were pre-conscious. Another example of our pre-conscious mind is problem solving. Suppose we are trying to decide what is the best way to manage conflicting holiday commitments. We might tell ourselves that we will think about it and return to the question later after an hour or a day or even weeks setting it aside from our conscious mind. When we do again turn our conscious attention to the question we will discover that there are now ideas present that were not there the last time we thought about it. Our pre-conscious mind has been thinking about it all along in some manner. The new ideas may have come from outside sources, conversations, the radio, TV broadcasts, other experiences, fantasies in the pre-conscious mind or unconscious fantasies that crossed the repression barrier into our pre-conscious mind. All of this usually results in more creative solutions to questions than our first thoughts might result in.

Our unconscious mind is that part of our mind that always remains outside of conscious awareness. Fantasies are constantly being created in our unconscious minds that are templates for possible actions that we may or may not take. We enact only a very few of our fantasies. The repression barrier keeps thoughts out of our pre-conscious or conscious mind for many different reasons. If we were aware of all of our thoughts all the time it would be quite confusing. There are also thoughts that are quite upsetting or distracting to us consciously that could interfere with our current activity. The repression barrier usually works quite well until something occurs that causes repressed thoughts to break through such as reading something that happened to someone that now reminds us of something we experienced.

Some people lose their ability to differentiate between what is arriving into their conscious mind from fantasies as opposed to what is entering into their minds from the outside world. This break down in reality testing is psychosis. This may or may not include hallucinations. Hallucinations are sensations that seem to be coming from outside the person but are actually coming from the person's mind. The most common of these are auditory. Some people start to hear unconscious thoughts as voices coming from the *outside* of their head. Many people "hear" their own thoughts or the voices of people they knew inside their own head. This is not hallucinating. It is when the person experiences the source of the stimulus to be outside of their head that it is referred to as hallucinations. Dreaming is a type of hallucination. In situations of toxic reactions or severe physical illnesses people can also have visual hallucinations – seeing things that are not there. People who are hallucinating may or may NOT be psychotic. When a person realizes and believes that others are not hearing the voices or seeing the images he or she may not be psychotic. I have had patients who were responding to prescription medications with strange frightening hallucinations of dead bodies or other grotesque images. These patients rationally knew the images could not be true since no one else saw them and the images would come ago go in ways that things in ordinary reality do not. Thus these patients had insight into the likelihood that what they were seeing was not real. However they still were terrified by the images until removing the causative agent or blocking them with other medications successfully halted them. When medication successfully blocks visual hallucinations patients are always very grateful and tremendously relieved. Reality testing is failing when we are unable to distinguish sensations from hallucinations.

Another way that reality testing can break down is by a loss of insight. This means that a person loses the ability to realize things may not be exactly as they first appear. A simple example is proverbs. If we say to someone “What does it mean to say, ‘Don’t cry over spilled milk?’” If the person responds by saying, “If you spill your milk you should not cry,” and even with prompting they are unable abstract or interpret the idea to approximate “Don’t get too upset about small things that you cannot change,” then they are referred to as having concrete thoughts and are being literal in their thinking which indicates that he or she lacks insight. Insight is the ability to realize that one statement or thought may represent other ideas too. This lack of insight could be due to mental retardation but is more frequently due to some degree of psychosis. It is possible for a person to be psychotic and lacking of insight in some areas of their lives and not in others!

When people lose insight they can become quite unusual in the way they communicate. A young man in treatment came into my office for a therapy session. He started out by saying, “God is going to give me a green car on St Patrick’s day if I quit smoking!” At first I had little idea what he was trying to tell me. I asked him a few general questions such as what made him think this or what did this mean to him to which he responded with irritation that I seemed so dense. He felt he was quite clear in what he was saying to me. He also believed that he was the son of God (not Jesus) and I was a high priest. He had tremendous difficulty communicating with anyone other than me. I finally asked him what he was going to use the car for to which he responded, “Well you can’t take a girl out on a date on the bus!” He was quite irritated that I seemed not to understand what he had said in his initial statement regarding the green car. After more detective work I learned that he believed if he stops smoking he might have the money he needs to get a car so that he might be able to go on a date with a girl he had met recently at a store. This was still not the whole meaning of his statement. I suggested to him that it seemed to me that he is also telling me that he is feeling very lonely. At this he started to cry and said I was the only high priest that ever understands him. While his statement about the green car appeared to me at first response to be quite concrete, in many ways it was his mind’s indirect effort to tell me how lonely he felt. This was not a thought that he could consciously logically and clearly communicate to me. Partly he did not want to be aware of how badly his illness had changed his life. He was trying to repress his feelings of loneliness. His unconscious was talking to me through him. While in his conscious mind he was quite concrete in his thoughts and magically believed I could understand immediately anything he had to say his unconscious mind was constructing elaborate, clever and symbolic ways to communicate with me much as dreams are also communications from our unconscious minds to us.

Even in the absence of disruptions to our own personal reality testing we are still unable to experience reality directly. Our five senses are narrowly focused on highly selected ranges of stimuli that only respond to a tiny fraction of what is actually physically present where we are. For example most of us cannot hear dog whistles because our hearing does not go high enough. Also we can only see an extremely narrow part of the electromagnetic wave band. This wave band not by accident is the band of light that bounces off most objects so that we can easily maneuver around things. But in addition to visible light the room you are sitting in as you read this is completely saturated with radio stations, TV stations, cell phone conversations, thousands of satellite transmissions, X-rays, microwaves and numerous other sources of non-visible light.

Quantum physics and experiments in sub-atomic particles demonstrates that time itself is discontinuous occurring in tiny little discrete bits and we live in a universe that is jumping in unison from bit to bit *with no continuity between the bits* like a movie goes from frame to frame. We go from bit to bit but what we experience subjectively is a steady continuous flow. From a sensory point of view we only experience a tiny slice of reality.

The scientific method is the tool that we have created that has begun to enable us to determine what is truly real. The scientific method requires observers with different subjective and projective biases to observe the same results from an experiment. Prior to Pasteur's experiment regarding the spontaneous generation of life the prevailing view of the world was that life spontaneously would generate from any organic substance. If chicken broth was left out and things start growing in it, people generally believed the growths had spontaneously generated from the soup. Pasteur put chicken broth in a glass bottle with a curved neck so that nothing from the air could fall into it. He boiled the soup and let it sit. Nothing grew. This disproved spontaneous generation as the primary source of everyday living things. No matter what your political, social, religious or mental point of view nothing will grow from what we now call a sterilized soup. This was so counter to common sense that many people refused (and probably still refuse) to believe spontaneous generation does not happen. Otherwise where did all this life come from? This inexorably and inevitably led to the theory of evolution.

From science we have discovered many things that were unknown before because we could not sense them – bacteria, viruses, super novae, molecules, atoms, energy and much more. And we have learned how to create many devices that previously were not even imaginable that are quite convenient to everyday survival. The tractor, ground transportation and refrigeration have enabled us to have an abundant supply of food at least in developed countries. Science that is based on the ability to share information and experiments with many other people is the only tool that we ultimately have to understand and discover reality.

Prior to the scientific method the true nature of the universe around us was massively distorted by subjective and projective attitudes. No human experiences reality directly. Rather we create unconscious models of what we believe reality is based on what we have been taught and based upon what we believe we have experienced neither of which is completely rooted in reality. From these models we generalize unconsciously to all situations resulting in our being frankly wrong much of the time. As a therapist I have to constantly realize that I am likely significantly misunderstanding something a patient is trying to communicate to me while I may be correct about other ideas regarding them. I must remain open to surprise and discovery or I will inadvertently misunderstand important thoughts and feelings in every patient since no patient is exactly like me. I also have to be quite cautious about assuming how a person feels about a given situation they have been through. Many people who have experienced traumatic violence such as rape, war, or natural disasters feel *guilty*. To the novice therapist this is significantly counter-intuitive. This can lead to severe breaks in empathy with the patient and a total failure to help the patient express what they felt rather than what the therapist erroneously believes the patient 'should' have felt.

We all project our beliefs onto others and then interpret who and what they are based on our own projections. Road rage is a classic example of this. The angry person who already believes the world is a dog eat dog place - an oxymoron since in reality dogs affectionately and cooperatively live in packs working together except for occasional struggles over dominance issues – all packs need a leader - is cut off in traffic by someone else. The road rage person immediately assumes the driver of the other car is purposely and personally attacking him or her, which provokes the road rage person into a counter attack. The road rage driver bases all this on a fantasized projection. The real scientific reason the other person made the driving error usually is because he or she was distracted by some news or awareness of some monumental issue occurring in their life at that time. It almost always has nothing to do with person that was cut off or squeezed out. Yet the reality of the road rage driver is blind to this most likely possibility. The road rage driver goes through life living in a subjective reality where they are constantly being cut off, disappointed and abused. These are likely experiences the person did have earlier in their lives but that no longer apply to their current circumstances except to the extent that the road rage person continues to describe and understand all of their experiences from the wrong point of view. This is a very difficult and painful way to live.

The “facts” of an event never define what anyone experiences about the event. Couples can audio or videotape arguments in an attempt to prove their point of view to the other. This rarely is helpful since the arguments almost always are about the meaning of the facts and the meaning of what is said to the hearer or viewer. We cannot videotape the meaning of facts for anyone. Meaning is a subjective experience that does not necessarily reflect reality at all.

Both the good and the bad news about reality is that what you experience is what you expect to experience. Our experience is not based at all upon what happens to us. The proof of this most dramatically is that if we did not have a head we would not experience anything! Our experience of life is completely initially based upon how we *unconsciously* interpret what is happening to us. The very good news is that we can with significant effort radically change our experience of life to a completely new, happier, more loving, more creative and more fulfilling existence. All we need to do is change our unconscious mind by changing our conscious mind by reinterpreting what our unconscious mind initially believes.

As adults the reality of our lives is joyfully a choice that we can make rather than an overpowering force imposed upon us from outside of us. It is a choice that only slowly unfolds since it may require a radical shift in our unconscious ways of thinking. This shift requires time, practice and support from others who are also working on their new realities. We learn reality and share reality with those around us. Oddly it is still good news that it changes only slowly for otherwise our lives would feel completely whimsical and always chaotic. We are each seduced by what we currently believe is real. Make it become a seduction that sustains and empowers you rather than one that drains and consumes you. Remember also that there is no other. Whatever we do to or even wish for another we are also doing to and wishing for ourselves. Whatever criticisms or curses we believe we may be aiming at others always be aware that the echoes of these criticisms and curses are falling back upon us. The love, forgiveness, encouragement and hopes we have for others will also fall back onto ourselves.

Our experience of reality is based upon what we expect it to be. Our experience of reality is only one possible view of actual reality. Our experience is a result of our beliefs. When we change our beliefs we will also powerfully change what we experience. It is from our relationship with others that we may mold our experience of reality into something that sustains each other and us. In community we can support the changes we are trying to make within ourselves and at the same time help others to make similar changes. We are able to grow safely in community. Since each of our own personal experience of reality is inaccurate, left by ourselves we can infinitely distort what reality actually is. The more we distort our beliefs about reality from what is true the more difficult life becomes for us. It is in community that we have safety. If we only believe our own thoughts about what is real we eventually totally blind ourselves to any truth and our decisions about living become inconsistent with health. Carefully chosen friends and communities provide interdependent security for all of us and enables each of us to more accurately continue our pursuit of love, truth and reality.

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