

Reality Is a Shared Hallucination

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“Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see, the thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception.” —Don DeLillo

“We are accustomed to use our eyes only with the memory of what other people before us have thought about the object we are looking at.” —Guy de Maupassant

“After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin’ but a collective hunch.” —Lily Tomlin

The artificial construction of reality was to play a key role in the new form of global intelligence which would soon emerge among human beings. If the group brain’s “psyche” were a beach with shifting dunes and hollows, individual perception would be that beach’s grains of sand. However, this image has a hidden twist. Individual perception untainted by others’ influence does not exist.

A central rule of large-scale organization goes like this: The greater the spryness of a massive enterprise, the more internal communication it takes to support the teamwork of its parts.¹ For example, in all but the simplest plants and animals only 5 percent of DNAs dedicated to DNA’s “real job,” manufacturing proteins.² The remaining 95 percent is preoccupied with organization and administration, supervising the maintenance of bodily procedures, or even merely interpreting the corporate rule book “printed” in a string of genes.³

In an effective learning machine, the connections deep inside far outnumber windows to the outside world. Take the cerebral cortex, roughly 80 percent of whose nerves connect with each other, not with input from the eyes or ears.⁴ The learning device called human society follows the same rules. Individuals spend most of their time communicating with each other, not exploring such ubiquitous elements of their “environment” as insects and weeds which could potentially make a nourishing dish.⁵ This cabling for the group’s internal operations has a far greater impact on what we “see” and “hear” than many psychological researchers suspect. For it puts us in the hands of a conformity enforcer whose power and subtlety are almost beyond belief.

In our previous episode we mentioned that the brain’s emotional center—the limbic system—decides which swatches of experience to notice and store in memory. Memory is the core of what we call reality. Think about it for a second.

What do you actually hear right now and see? This page. The walls and furnishings of the room in which you sit. Perhaps some music or some background noise. Yet you know as sure as you were born that out of sight there are other rooms mere steps away—perhaps the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and a hall. What makes you so sure that they exist? Nothing but your memory.

Nothing else at all. You’re also reasonably certain there’s a broader world outside. You know that your office, if you are away from it, still awaits your entry. You can picture the roads you use to get to it, visualize the public foyer and the conference rooms, see in your mind’s eye the path to your own workspace, and know where most of the things in your desk are placed. Then there are the companions who enrich your life—family, workmates, neighbors, friends, a husband or a wife, and even people you are fond of to whom you haven’t spoken in a year or two—few of whom, if any, are currently in the room with you. You also know we sit on a planet called the earth, circling an incandescent ball of sun, buried in one of many galaxies. At this instant, reading by yourself, where do the realities of galaxies and friends reside? Only in the chambers of your mind. Almost every reality you “know” at any given second is a mere ghost held in memory.

The limbic system is memory’s gatekeeper and in a very real sense its creator. The limbic system is also an intense monitor of others,⁶ keeping track of what will earn their praises or their blame. By using cues from those around us to fashion our perceptions and the “facts” which we retain, our limbic system gives the group a say in that most central of realities, the one presiding in our brain.

Elizabeth Loftus, one of the world’s premier memory researchers, is among the few who realize how powerfully the group remakes our deepest certainties. In the late 1970s, Loftus performed a series of key experiments. In a typical session, she showed college students a moving picture of a traffic accident, then asked after the film, “How fast was the white sports car going when it passed the barn while traveling along the country road?” Several days later when witnesses to the

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