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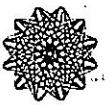
The Two Realities



Having arrived at the end of Part II, it seems useful to put some order into the kaleidoscopic diversity of the preceding examples and to show that they have an important common denominator.

The reader will have noticed that I have been unable to avoid the use of terms like "really," "actually," "in actual fact," and thus have apparently contradicted the main thesis of the book: that there is no absolute reality but only subjective and often contradictory conceptions of reality.

Very frequently, especially in psychiatry where the degree of an individual's "reality adaptation" plays a special role as the indicator of his normalcy, there is a confusion between two very different aspects of what we call reality. The first has to do with the purely physical, objectively discernible properties of things and is intimately linked with

OBJECTIVE + SUBJECTIVE REALITY *

correct sensory perception, with questions of so-called common sense or with objective, repeatable, scientific verification. The second aspect is the attribution of meaning and value to these things and is based on communication.

For example, before the advent of space travel there was heated disagreement among astronomers as to whether the surface of the moon was solid enough to support the weight of a space probe or whether it was covered by a thick layer of dust that would completely swallow the craft. We now know that the first hypothesis is *really* the case and that some scientists were therefore objectively right and others wrong. Or, to use a much simpler example, the question of whether a whale is a fish or a mammal can be answered objectively, as long as there is agreement on the definitions of "fish" and "mammal." Let us, therefore, use the term first-order reality whenever we mean those aspects which are accessible to perceptual consensus and especially to experimental, repeatable and verifiable proof (or refutation).

This domain of reality, however, says nothing about the *meaning* and *value* of its contents. A small child may perceive a red traffic light just as clearly as an adult, but may not know that it means "do not cross the street now." The first-order reality of gold—that is, its physical properties—is known and can be verified at any time. But the role that gold has played since the dawn of human history, especially the fact that its value is determined twice daily by five men in a small office in the City of London and that this ascription of value profoundly influences many other aspects of our everyday reality, has very little, if anything, to do with the physical properties of gold. But it is this second reality of gold which may turn us into millionaires or lead us into bankruptcy.

The interpersonal conflicts mentioned in preceding chapters, those caused by the discrepancy of cultural roles and norms, show the difference between the two orders of

reality even more sharply. Quite obviously, there is no such thing as an objectively "correct" distance between two people, and depending on the norms of a given culture, kissing may be "correct" either in the early or only in the final stages of courtship behavior. Such rules are subjective, arbitrary and have nothing to do with the expression of eternal, Platonic truths. In the domain of second-order reality then, it is absurd to argue about what is "really" real.

But we lose sight of this distinction all too easily, or, worse, we are totally unaware of the existence of two very separate realities and naïvely assume that reality is the way we see things, and anybody who sees them differently must of necessity be mad or bad.

It can be objectively verified if I jump in the water to save a drowning person. But there is no objective evidence as to whether I do it out of charity, the need to appear heroic, or because I know that the drowning man is a millionaire. On these questions there are only subjective attributions of meaning. It is a delusion to believe that there is a "real" second-order reality and that "sane" people are more aware of it than "madmen."

The next segment has the courtship behavior example referred to above. Of interest also is an Einstein quote that is very illuminating

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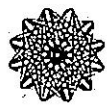
Punctuation



There is a joke, known to most psychology students, in which a laboratory rat says of its experimenter, "I have trained that man so that every time I press this lever, he gives me food." Obviously the rat sees the S-R (stimulus-response) sequence quite differently than the experimenter does. To the experimenter, the rat's pressing the lever is a conditioned reaction to a preceding stimulus administered by him, while to the rat, the pressing of the lever is its stimulus administered to the experimenter. To the human, the food is a reward; to the rat, a reaction. In other words, the two *punctuate* the communicational sequence differently.*

* Since I have dealt with this phenomenon in greater detail elsewhere [176], I want to limit myself here to less theoretical examples. I shall

Ordering sequences in one way or another creates what, without undue exaggeration, may be called different realities. This is particularly evident in certain kinds of human conflict. A mother may see herself as the bridge between her husband and her children: if it were not for her, there would be no bond or contact between him and them. Far from sharing this view, the husband sees her as an obstacle between him and his children: if it were not for her constant interference and monitoring, he could have a much closer and more cordial relationship with them. If we do not bear in mind that this is a problem of punctuation—and not of one way of *behaving* rather than another—we may become victims of the same fallacy as the two parents and consider one of them mad or bad, the typical charges made when communication breaks down as a result of the discrepant punctuation of jointly experienced sequences of behavior. Just as with the rat and the experimenter, it is not the events themselves that they see differently, but their supposed order, and this gives them diametrically opposed meanings.

A husband believes that his wife dislikes to be seen with him in public. As "proof" he describes an occasion when they were late for an engagement, and as they were walking briskly from their car she kept staying behind him. "No

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therefore side-step the question of why it is necessary to punctuate, i.e., impose an order, or *Gestalt*, on the sequences of events surrounding and involving any living being, and merely point to the obvious: without this order the world would appear truly random—that is, chaotic, unpredictable and extremely threatening. The Gestalt psychologists showed as early as the 1920s that this ordering is embedded in the deepest layers of our perceptions' neurophysiology, and its effect can be followed from there up to the highest levels of human functioning to, for example, creative activities and humor, as in the joke where a man arrives in heaven and finds an old friend sitting there with a luscious young woman on his lap. "Heaven indeed," says the newcomer, "is she your reward?" "No," replies the old man sadly, "I am her punishment." Clearly this is a matter of punctuation!

matter how much I slowed down," he explains, "she always stayed several steps behind me." "That is not true," she retorts indignantly. "No matter how fast I walked, he always kept several steps ahead of me."

In this case it was not the partners' individual punctuations that led to their two different views of the same occasion, but the other way around: they already had a discrepant view of their relationship and therefore tended to punctuate according to their individual views. This is very much in keeping with Einstein's remark: "It is the theory which decides what we can observe." But in human relationships the "theory" is itself the outcome of punctuation, and we run into a chicken-and-egg problem as to which came first—the problem or the punctuation. People remain consistently unaware of their discrepant views and naïvely assume that there is only *one* reality and *one* right view of it (namely their own); therefore anyone who sees things differently must be either mad or bad. But there is strong evidence that in the interaction between organisms there is a circular pattern: cause produces effect, and effect feeds back on cause, becoming itself a cause [177]. The result is very much like two people trying to communicate while speaking two different languages, or two players trying to play a game with two separate sets of rules.

During the last years of World War II and the early postwar years, hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers were stationed in or passed through Great Britain, providing a unique opportunity to study the effects of a large-scale penetration of one culture by another. One interesting aspect was a comparison of courtship patterns. Both American soldiers and British girls accused one another of being sexually brash. Investigation of this curious double charge brought to light an interesting punctuation problem. In both cultures, courtship behavior from the first eye contact to the ultimate consummation went through ap-

proximately thirty steps, but the sequence of these steps was different. Kissing, for instance, comes relatively early in the North American pattern (occupying, let us say, step 5) and relatively late in the English pattern (at step 25, let us assume), where it is considered highly erotic behavior. So when the U.S. soldier somehow felt that the time was right for a harmless kiss, not only did the girl feel cheated out of twenty steps of what for her would have been proper behavior on his part, she also felt she had to make a quick decision: break off the relationship and run, or get ready for intercourse. If she chose the latter, the soldier was confronted with behavior that according to *his* cultural rules could only be called shameless at this early stage of the relationship.

If we were to commit the mistake of looking at the girl's behavior in isolation, without taking into account its interactional nature, we would have no difficulty making a psychiatric diagnosis: if she suddenly runs, she is behaving hysterically; if she offers herself sexually, she is a nymphomaniac. Here again we are faced with a conflict that cannot and must not be reduced to the madness or badness of one partner, since it lies exclusively in the nature of their communication impasse.° It is in the nature of these disinformation problems that the partners cannot resolve them, for, as Wittgenstein once remarked, "What we cannot think, we cannot think; we cannot therefore say what we cannot think" [187]—or, as Ronald D. Laing put it: "If I don't know I know, I think I don't know" [83].

°This example could well have been included in Part I as another illustration of a "translation" mistake.

Foreword

This book is about the way in which communication creates what we call reality. At first glance this may seem a most peculiar statement, for surely reality is what is, and communication is merely a way of expressing or explaining it.

Not at all. As the book will show, our everyday, traditional ideas of reality are delusions which we spend substantial parts of our daily lives shoring up, even at the considerable risk of trying to force facts to fit our definition of reality instead of vice versa. And the most dangerous delusion of all is that there is only one reality. What there are, in fact, are many different versions of reality, some of which are contradictory, but all of which are the results of communication and not reflections of eternal, objective truths.

The close connection between reality and communication is a relatively new idea. Although physicists and engineers long ago solved the problems of transmitting signals effectively, and although linguists have for centuries been engaged in exploring the origin and structure of language, and semanticists have been delving into the meanings of signs and symbols, the pragmatics of communication—that is, the ways in which people can drive each other crazy and the very different world views that can arise as a consequence of communication—have become an independent area of research only in the past decades.

It is my unabashed intention to entertain the reader by presenting in anecdotal form certain selected subjects from this new field of scientific investigation—subjects that are, I hope, unusual, intriguing and yet of very practical, direct importance in explaining how different views of reality arise and what human conflicts are about.

Some of the examples used, which are taken from fiction, jokes, games and puzzles, may seem frivolous, but they should not mask the underlying seriousness of the enterprise. There are two methods of scientific explanation. One is to expound a theory and then show how observable facts bear it out.* The other is to present examples from many different contexts to make obvious, in a very practical way, the structure that they have in common and the conclusions that follow from them. In the first approach, the examples are used as proof. In the second, their function is metaphorical and illustrative—they are meant to demonstrate something, to translate it into a more familiar language, but not necessarily to prove anything.

I have chosen the second approach, and through it I hope

* An excellent example of this form of presentation of the same subject matter is *The Social Construction of Reality*, by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman (Doubleday, 1966).

to enable the reader to enter the complex field of reality formation by the back door so to speak. No prior knowledge of the subject matter is necessary; no theories or formulas are given. But the bibliography in the back provides the necessary references and source materials for anyone who wants to probe more deeply into any of the areas suggested here. I like to think that the student of the social or behavioral sciences may perhaps find in these pages some ideas for a research project or a subject for his dissertation.

I hope that the book may serve another function as well. As I have already said, the belief that one's own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions. It becomes still more dangerous if it is coupled with a missionary zeal to enlighten the rest of the world, whether the rest of the world wishes to be enlightened or not. To refuse to embrace wholeheartedly a particular definition of reality (e.g., an ideology), to dare to see the world differently, can become a "think-crime" in a truly Orwellian sense as we get steadily closer to 1984. I would like to think that this book might contribute, if only in a small way, to creating an awareness of those forms of psychological violence which might make it more difficult for the modern mind-rapists, brainwashers and self-appointed world saviors to exert their evil power.

My original training in modern languages and philosophy, my years of practical experience in criminal investigation and security work, and especially my twenty-four years as a clinical psychotherapist, fourteen of them spent as a research associate and investigator at the Mental Research Institute in Palo Alto, an institution devoted to the study of interpersonal communication and its disturbances in families and larger social contexts, have given me direct contact with most of the material presented here. Other parts of the book are based on my teaching and consulting activities as clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at Stanford Univer-

sity and guest lecturer at various universities and psychiatric research or training institutes in the United States, Canada, Latin America and Europe. Some of the subjects mentioned in the book I know only indirectly and theoretically, but needless to say, the responsibility for any errors rests exclusively with me.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I deals with *confusion;* that is, those breakdowns of communication and attendant distortions that arise involuntarily. Part II examines the somewhat exotic concept of *disinformation,* by which I mean such knots, impasses and delusions as may come about in the voluntary process of actively seeking or of deliberately withholding information. Part III is devoted to the fascinating problems involved in establishing *communication* in areas where none is as yet in existence—that is, of creating a reality that can usefully be shared by human and other beings, especially animals and extraterrestrials.

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P.W.