

# 4

## The Illusion of Reality



*All that we see or seem  
is but a dream within a dream.*

Edgar Allen Poe

**T**he faculty of consciousness is one thing we all share, but what goes on in our consciousness, the *forms* that consciousness takes on, varies widely. This is our personal reality, the reality we each know and experience. Invariably we mistake this personal reality for physical reality, believing ourselves to be in direct contact with the world “out there.” But the colors and sounds we experience are not really “out there”; they are all images in the mind, pictures of reality we have constructed. This one fact leads to a radical rethinking of the relationship between consciousness and reality.

The idea that we never experience the physical world directly has intrigued many philosophers. Most notable was the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel

Kant, who drew a clear distinction between the forms that appear in the mind—what he called the *phenomenon* (a Greek word meaning “that which appears to be”)—and the world that gives rise to this perception, which he called the *noumenon* (meaning “that which is apprehended”). All we know, Kant insisted, is the phenomenon. The noumenon, the “thing-in-itself,” remains forever beyond our knowing.

A century earlier, the British philosopher John Locke had argued that all knowledge is based on perception caused by external objects acting on the senses. Locke thought perception was passive—the mind simply reflecting the images received by the senses—but Kant proposed that the mind is an active participant in the process, continually shaping our experience of the world. Reality, he believed, is something we each construct for ourselves.

---

As to the ultimate things we can know  
nothing, and only when we admit this do  
we return to equilibrium.

Carl Jung

---

Unlike some of his predecessors, Kant was not suggesting that this reality is the *only* reality. Irish theologian Bishop Berkeley had argued that we know only our perceptions. He then concluded that nothing exists apart from our perceptions, which forced him into the difficult position of having to explain what happened to the world when no one

was perceiving it. Kant held that there *is* an underlying reality, but we never know it directly. All we can ever know is how it appears in our minds.

## The Image in the Mind

Remarkably, Kant came to these conclusions without any of our current scientific knowledge, or any understanding of the physiology of perception. Today we know much more about how the brain constructs its picture of reality.

When I look at a tree, light reflected from the tree forms an image of the tree on the retina of my eye. Photosensitive cells in the retina discharge electrons, triggering electrochemical impulses that travel down the optic nerve to the visual cortex of the brain. There the data undergoes complex processing that reveals shapes, patterns, colors, and movements. The brain then integrates this information into a coherent whole, creating its own reconstruction of the external world. Finally, an image of the tree appears in my consciousness. Just how my neural activity gives rise to a conscious experience is the “hard problem” mentioned earlier. Though we have no idea how an image appears in the mind, it does happen. I have the conscious experience of seeing a tree.

Similar activities take place with the other senses. A vibrating violin string creates pressure waves in the air. These waves stimulate minute hairs in the inner ear, which send electrical impulses on to the brain. As with vision, the

raw data is then analyzed and integrated, culminating in the experience of hearing music.

Chemical molecules emanating from the skin of an apple trigger receptors in the nose, leading to the experience of smelling an apple. Cells in the skin send messages to the brain that lead to experiences of touch, pressure, texture, and warmth.

In short, all that I perceive—everything I see, hear, taste, touch, and smell—has been reconstructed from sensory data. I think I am perceiving the world around me, but all that I am directly aware of are the colors, shapes, sounds, and smells that appear in the mind.

---

Every man's world picture is and always remains a construct of his mind, and cannot be proved to have any other existence.

Erwin Schrödinger

---

Our perception of the world has the very convincing appearance of being “out there” around us, but it is no more “out there” than are our nightly dreams. In our dreams we are aware of sights, sounds, and sensations happening around us. We are aware of our bodies. We think and reason. We feel fear, anger, pleasure, and love. We experience other people as separate individuals, speaking and interacting with us. The dream appears to be happening “out there” in the world around us. Only when we awaken do we realize that it was all just a dream—a creation in the mind.

When we say, “It was all just a dream,” we are referring to the fact that the experience was not based on physical reality. It was created from memories, hopes, fears, and other factors. In the waking state, our image of the world is based on sensory information drawn from our physical surroundings. This gives our waking experience a consistency and sense of reality not found in dreams. But the truth is, our waking reality is as much a creation of our minds as are our dreams.<sup>1</sup>

---

I have given everything I see . . .  
all the meaning it has for me.

A Course in Miracles

---

The idea that reality is a creation of the mind seems to run counter to common sense. Right now you are aware of the pages in front of you, various objects around you, sensations in your own body, and sounds in the air. Even though you may understand it is all a reconstruction of reality, it still appears that you are having a direct perception of the physical world. And I am not suggesting you should try to see it otherwise. What is important for

---

<sup>1</sup>This is not to suggest that we create physical reality. Some people believe our thinking or attitude can have a direct impact on the state of the physical world. Whether or not this is possible is an open question. Here I refer only to creating our personal experience of reality.