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Redefining Reality (Part One) : Psychology, Science and Solipsism
Reality may not be as objective as we once believed.

Published on January 1, 2010 by Stephen A. Diamond, Ph.D. in Evil Deeds

The Zen teacher Chuang Tzu dreamed he was a butterfly. When he woke, he wondered, "Am I a man who dreamt about being a butterfly, or am I really a butterfly who now dreams about being a man?"

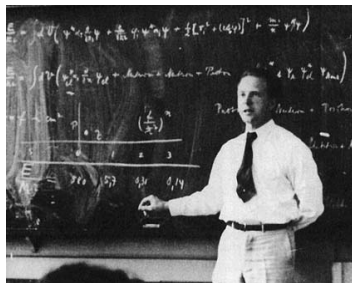
The fundamental question regarding the nature of reality is partly philosophical, partly spiritual, part psychological, and partly scientific in nature. But it is not merely academic. For how we perceive, understand, experience, interpret and respond to reality has concrete and practical repercussions in both our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, for the practice of psychotherapy, as well as regarding how we relate to the planet and cosmos. Last year, I posted a few thoughts on the topic of subjective or relative reality. As we enter 2010, it seems an opportune time to review what was said, and continue the conversation here on what is real and what is not. I invite readers to share their personal insights and realities in response.

This discussion started explicitly with my piece on "Truth, Lies, and Self-Deception," (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evil-deeds/200811/essential-secrets-psychotherapy-truth-lies-and-self-deception>) stimulated by the psychologically complex Casey Anthony case. The theme resurfaced in response to postings by fellow PT bloggers William Todd Schultz and Nathan Heflick regarding the complicated Freud-Jung relationship. It later informed one of my subsequent posts titled "What is Real Psychotherapy?" (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evil-deeds/200909/beauty-god-death-what-is-real-psychotherapy>). And it can be seen as implicit and central to my most recent postings about Islamic terrorism, since clearly the perception of reality underlying and motivating the tactics of Muslim extremists is fundamentally foreign to the perception of reality here in the West. These sometimes radically differing realities are at the very root of most hostile relationship, religious and political conflicts.

As with the difficult task of defining reality in any relationship, Freud's interpretation of what went wrong between he and Carl Jung and why was radically different than Jung's own perception. My interpretation of why Freud's friendship with Jung foundered is different than that of professor Schultz. And all three of us--myself, Schultz, Heflick and the entire mental health field in general--have divergent ideas as to what defines "real" psychology and psychotherapy. Can we all be right? Or is there one overarching, supreme objective reality that either all or some of us are missing? Is all reality relative? Who gets to define reality? Is reality merely something constructed by us as opposed to having a reality of its own? Does the postmodern deconstruction of reality lead

to a loss or destruction of any objective reality? The implications of these admittedly heady but highly pragmatic musings are staggering for the practice of psychotherapy and the future of psychology. So let's get right to it.

For me, reality is something both subjective and objective. What I mean is that objective reality, say the existence of the physical universe, does not necessarily depend on subjectivity to be real. But then, subjective reality, say the experience of an emotion, impulse or dream, doesn't necessarily depend on objective reality for its existence. The subjective world is as real as the objective world. Both have their own reality. One is not "more real" than the other. But when subjectivity trumps objectivity, or vice-versa, we get into trouble. When hallucinations or delusions, for example, become so real for a person that they overpower and nullify objective reality, we call this dangerous state of mind "psychosis." And when objective reality totally dominates subjective reality, we lose touch with who we really are. Interiority and exteriority are two sides of the same coin we collectively call reality. Interiority is associated with introversion and subjectivity; exteriority with objectivity and extraversion. Too much of either can become pathological.



Heisenberg

Some have suggested that the real problem regarding subjective and objective reality is that distinguishing between them to begin with is a false dichotomy, one increasingly fostered and foisted upon us by Western science over the past several centuries. The famous Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle demonstrates to at least some social scientists that life cannot be cleanly divided into the roles of observer of reality and observed reality itself, since reality can be subtly affected by the very act of observation. Primitive peoples made, and still make, no such distinction between subject and object, treating reality more organically and wholistically, dwelling in a perpetual state of consciousness (or really, unconsciousness) referred to as participation mystique. (I would argue that, similarly, there is no clear boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, since these states constantly intermingle and influence each other.)

In our culture, when this boundary between interior and exterior reality becomes blurred or lost completely, we typically tend to view it as severe psychopathology. Such extraordinary but profoundly imbalanced states of mind can be extremely debilitating and potentially dangerous to both self and others. But this non-dichotomous or non-dualistic mental state has also been traditionally associated with spiritual enlightenment as well as artistic creativity. As Pablo Picasso put it, "Everything you can imagine is real." Psychiatrist Carl Jung once made unequivocally clear to a supervisee his assertion that when a particular patient had dreamed about being on the moon, she was really on the moon. What did Jung mean by this?



Having himself suffered through his own traumatic period of confusion between inner and outer reality, Jung came to recognize that reality does not include only the outer world, but the inner world as well. And that what we collectively agree to call consensual objective reality is no more important or real than our subjective, inner reality. The truth is we live in two different worlds: the outer world of objective reality and the inner world of subjective reality. Jung went so far as to refer to aspects of our inner reality as the "objective psyche," emphasizing both its relative autonomy from ego-consciousness and its inherent universal or archetypal reality. While the physical laws of outer and psychological laws of inner reality differ, both are vitally important in daily life. Like the Zen master who poses to his disciples the reality-testing koan or didactic question, "When a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound if no one is around to hear it?", Werner Heisenberg's basic contribution to quantum physics, writes one commentator, "would imply that reality is created by the observer; in other words: if we take Heisenberg literally, the moon is not there when nobody is looking at it. However, we must consider the possibility that . . . the moon may be there after all. This conflict is the philosophical essence of the Uncertainty Principle."

Phenomenology is a philosophical method or technique we use in existential psychotherapy to try to get closer to the patient's subjective truth or reality. This requires being conscious of and setting aside our usual preconceptions and biases (or at least recognizing them as such) as much as possible when we encounter the patient, so as to be able to comprehend and experience more clearly his or her subjective reality. Cognitive psychology--which focuses primarily on how we think--understands that our subjective experience of outer reality depends largely on how we interpret objective reality. Two individuals can witness the same external event, but interpret and perceive it totally differently, depending on how they think about or cognitively process it. (See my previous post on self-deception.) "For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," says Shakespeare's Hamlet, who echoes Epictetus from the first-century A.D.: "Men are not influenced by things, but by their thoughts about things."

So reality may not be as objective as we once believed. But recognizing this unsettling possibility is a far cry from the postmodernist rejection of the existence of objective reality out of hand. This throwing out the baby with the bath water regarding reality is employed, for example, by some

psychotherapists to negate the need, clinical utility, reliability and validity of psychiatric diagnosis. Certainly, various contextual influences and subjective factors come into play when supposedly objectively diagnosing mental disorders. To not recognize this reality would be naive. This is why diagnosis in psychiatry and psychology, like psychotherapy, is really more of an art than a science. (Which, for me, is not a pejorative but rather realistic statement.) Similarly, neo-Freudians (see, for example, Dr. Robert Stolorow's work on intersubjectivity) are just recently acknowledging that the analyst is not the sole arbiter of objective reality in the therapeutic relationship. So we psychologists are slowly starting to recognize the limits of our understanding about reality, our unconscious biases, and to reconsider reality's very nature.

One radical reaction to this recognition of reality's relativity and partial subjectivity is to reject any and all prior claims to our capacity to know reality, and, in some circles, to deny objective reality altogether. This is a type of psychological solipsism: refusal to recognize the objective existence of reality beyond the mind or psyche's subjectivity. But the solution to this dilemma does not call for or warrant such extreme rejection of our capacity to apprehend reality because of our becoming more aware of its inherent uncertainty and complexity. On the contrary, reality consists of both objective or external phenomena and subjective, internal experiences which are constantly acting upon and influencing each other. (See Part Two.) Denying either is a simplistic, cowardly and convenient reconstruction of reality as we would like it to be, rather than a courageous, organic acceptance of reality as it truly is--in all its glorious ambiguity and mystery.

Redefining Reality (Part Two) : Psychotherapy, Synchronicity, and the Rainmaker Does our subjective state of mind influence objective reality?

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In my previous post (Part One), I suggested that we live in two worlds: the inner world and the outer world. That we participate in two different but equally legitimate realities: subjective and objective reality. And that these integrally related realities constantly interface and influence each other. But just how does that happen? What is the relationship between inner, subjective reality and outer, objective reality? Can what happens in the inner world of subjectivity affect, for better or worse, concrete events in the outer world? These are profound and crucial questions for the practice of psychotherapy.

But let's begin by turning this latter question around: Can what happens in the outer world, what we call consensual objective reality, affect our inner reality, our subjectivity? The answer from the perspective of psychology is certainly a resounding YES. We have all experienced the power of external events--be they catastrophes or crises such as a tsunami or terrorist attack, or receiving an unexpected phone call or e-mail message--to significantly affect how we subjectively feel, one way or another. So clearly, some intrinsic interrelationship exists between outer and inner reality, some link or bridge that connects the two and allows one to influence the other. It can be argued that subjectivity, e.g., cognitive distortions or unconscious complexes, act as intervening internal variables through which outer reality is filtered, interpreted and experienced. But what of the inverse? Does our subjective state of mind, our interior psychological landscape, shape, inform or

influence exteriority or objective, outer reality? And, if so, to what extent? And how?

Depth psychology concerns itself with these basic questions. After practicing psychotherapy for more than three decades, it is difficult for me to deny the subtle tie between a patient's inner and outer worlds, and how they tend to inform and reflect each other, oftentimes problematically. In this sense, psychotherapy, for me, is about helping the patient to discern the differences between subjectivity and objectivity, between inner and outer reality, to respect and honor both, and to do what he or she can to change either or both when possible or to accept either or both when change is impossible. (See my prior post on Change or Acceptance)

(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evil-deeds/200806/essential-secrets-psychotherapy-change-or-acceptance>.) For example, we may be able to change how we subjectively think, perceive or feel about something, someone or ourselves without ever changing outer reality. There may be certain aspects of our subjective experience or inner reality--existential anxiety or loneliness, for example--that cannot be changed and must be accepted. Or, we might make major changes in our external world, yet find that despite altering objective reality--e.g., moving to a different city, finding a new romantic partner, having plastic surgery--our subjective experience remains the same.

Behavior therapy, for instance, focuses mainly on changing or modifying what happens in the outer world of objective, observable reality. In contrast, cognitive therapy, psychopharmacology, and depth psychology--three very different treatment approaches--share a greater kinship than we might concede: each, in their own distinctive way, attempts to alter the patient's subjective reality, recognizing that such interior shifts of mood, perception, and attitude can manifest themselves in positive behavioral changes in the outer world. And that in turn, those beneficial changes in objective reality can themselves serve to reinforce and therapeutically transform the patient's subjective reality and sense of self, creating a sort of "positive snowball" to replace the prior "negative snowball" syndrome.

There are several versions of a parable about a renowned rainmaker. C.G. Jung was so fond of this allegory, he apparently told it whenever possible, feeling strongly that it spoke to the very essence of his own philosophy of psychotherapy. The story goes something like this:

A tiny village in China was suffering from the most severe drought anyone there could ever recall. There had not been a drop of rain for many months in an environment that depended on regular rainfall for its survival. The crops were dying. There was little food left. The water supply was running dangerously low. Dust flew everywhere, making it difficult for residents to breathe. Death hung in the air. All manner of traditional rituals, ceremonies and petitionary prayers were attempted in hopes of driving away any evil demons or negative spirits and ending the devastating drought. But, despite their best efforts, no rain came. Desperate, the village elder decided to send for professional assistance from a far away province: a renowned rainmaker. Upon arriving, the old, wizened rainmaker requested something very strange. He directed the villagers to construct a small straw hut just outside the village itself, to bring him enough food and water to last for five days, and to then leave him there alone, solitary, absolutely undisturbed. Not sure what to think, the frightened villagers did exactly as he said, and anxiously waited. Nothing happened. Three days passed uneventfully. But on the fourth day, dark clouds suddenly appeared. And it began to rain. And rain.

And rain. Ecstatic, grateful, yet totally mystified, the relieved villagers gathered round the rainmaker wanting to know how he had done it. He humbly and enigmatically explained: " I am not responsible for making the rain. When I first arrived in your village, it felt discordant, disharmonious, unbalanced, disturbed. And I felt out of sorts with myself. All I did was take time to get back in alignment with myself, into attunement with the Tao. Nature did the rest."

People sometimes experience such prolonged periods of "drought" in their lives, be it in the area of work, creativity, money, friendship, sex or love. And despite their intelligence, resourcefulness, perseverance, and best conscious efforts, they are unable to make something happen, to break the evil "spell" so to speak. They feel cursed, bewitched, jinxed, hoodooed. Indeed, this is often what brings them into therapy. What they don't realize is that the source of the "curse," the dry spell, is at least partly within. (Having said that, on the other hand, some patients tend to blame themselves too much for what happened or is or isn't happening to them in life.) They are out of sorts with themselves. Conflicted. Disoriented. Discouraged. Disturbed. Imbalanced. Anxious. Angry. Bitter. Negative. Confused. Unconscious. They have lost touch with their Ariadnean thread (see my prior post). In such debilitating and dangerous states of mind, bad things seem to just keep happening to us. "Bad luck," as we like to call it. But what is luck?

Like fate, we think of luck as a random aspect of objective reality totally beyond our control. But can such "luck" ever be affected by one's inner reality? The implication of the rainmaker allegory is that there is some mysterious correlation, or possibly even inseparability, unity, between our inner and outer lives. Between subjective and objective reality. Correlation, but not necessarily causality. Carl Jung called this correlation, this seemingly meaningful coincidence, synchronicity. Synchronicity can take both negative and positive forms. Curiously, as patients in psychotherapy get their inner house in order, adjust their attitude toward reality, come into closer attunement and harmony with who they really are and how they really feel, find and follow their Ariadnean thread, good things start to happen externally. It can look and feel miraculous. The relationship sought for so long suddenly appears. The perfect job presents itself. Other previously closed doors appear to open effortlessly.

But, while it may seem miraculous, this is not New Age magic stemming from some mental assertion of what the ego wants and doesn't want, or the power of positive thinking, or the so-called "laws of attraction." Synchronicity transcends the simplistic "magical thinking" of these popular but naive and misleading New Age metaphysical philosophies. In reality, these outer changes occur due to our decisively making a different type of effort to deal with the problem. Adopting a different attitude. Taking a different tack. One demanding at least as much hard work, courage, integrity and commitment as before, but now redirected inwardly rather than outwardly.

We cannot force the rain to fall. Nor will wishful thinking work. Change happens, rather, in response to, or as an outward manifestation of, our sustained efforts toward bringing our inner and outer world into better equilibrium. And because we have taken the time and effort to be more attuned to our authentic selves, more centered, more in touch with our senses, instincts and emotions, more mindful, more conscious, in closer relationship with the unconscious, we are internally and fundamentally transformed. And subtly, so is the outer world. Synchronicity grows. We become

more intuitive, receptive, sensitive and open to these synchronistic opportunities, possibilities which, in our prior state of mind, might have been rejected, dismissed out of hand, or languished completely unrecognized. Having embraced reality, reality embraces and supports us. We may not always get what we want. But we begin to get what we truly need. We are now in the proverbial right place at the right time. We have followed the way of the rainmaker. We are back in the Tao. Nature does the rest. Life flows. And the interminable, unendurable drought, at least for now, is ended.