

Virtual Reality

by Bill Herbst

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Over my lifetime, science has learned a great deal about the brain and how it works. Generally speaking, I find brain research compelling. Many of the “insight tidbits” that flow out of the laboratory and find their way into the media are fascinating. Others are disturbing. Of course, it’s hard to know with either of these categories (fascinating and disturbing) whether one is getting the straight scoop or some watered-down, oversimplified version that is far too sweeping in its apparent implications or just plain wrong in its conclusions.

For instance, damn near everything I’ve ever read in the mainstream media about astrology is garbage. I’ve studied the system for 50 years and made my livelihood as a full-time professional over that half century. My authority and expertise as an astrologer have been well-demonstrated. I can state without hesitation that 99% of what I’ve read about astrology in the press has been ridiculous nonsense.

Maybe it’s like that with everything. I don’t know. Still, what I’ve been exposed to from the science of brain research has changed how I see human beings and life in general.

One revelation from brain science and cognitive psychology that I find both fascinating and disturbing is that human beings don’t experience reality “directly” or “objectively.” We do so through the intermediary of our physical senses — sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell — and also through our thought constructs and feeling reactions. The input from our senses may seem direct to us, but it’s not. Our bodies and brains have co-evolved to create a fictional construct. In crude terms, we do something akin to computer modeling.

In other words, what we humans experience as “reality” is actually *virtual reality*.

Starting in the womb and then accelerating dramatically after birth, our brains begin building a framework through which all of our experiential inputs will be interpreted as “reality.” Heck, it’s no wonder that newborns sleep 18 hours a day. They’re exhausted from the herculean effort of building a reality framework. In actuality, that framework will be an artifice, a synthetic and simplified model of reality that may vary dramatically in complexity and accuracy from “true” or “objective” reality. Only we won’t know how much. All we’ll know is that this is reality to us, but it will be incorrect and inevitably lead us astray, setting us up

for shock, consternation, and disappointment when what we've assumed reality is turns out to be wrong.

Now, on the surface, this doesn't come as any great shock to me. Just look at all the crazy stuff that people believe, from the sublime to the ridiculous — superstitions, folk beliefs, fairy tales. For instance, some people insist that the earth is flat. Another is the belief that at death, the last image our eyes saw is "recorded," fixed permanently on our retinas. Well, those and ten thousand other beliefs are not true. Supposedly, we outgrow our childhood beliefs — Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny — and get more in synch with actual reality as we mature into adulthood. That presumption is stated in the famous Biblical quote from 1 Corinthians 13:

"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

That quote has a lovely resonance, and I sympathize with its poetic implications, namely, that we do and should change and mature as we age. But what disturbs me is that, according to the implications of brain research, we don't do that in fact. We don't give up our childhood versions of reality and embrace authentic reality. Why not? Because we have no way of knowing what true reality is. All we can know as human animals is the virtual reality framework that has been constructed by our brains — perhaps by us, at least to some extent, and perhaps by other unknown agencies, such as circumstance, genetics, society, chance, or even fate.

Instead, what happens is that the simple assumptions of our childhoods morph and shift and transform into more elaborate dreams that we then use as stand-ins for objective reality. We give up our childhood fantasies in exchange for adult fantasies. And yet, we may be no closer to understanding true reality than we were as children.

All of us get smacked from time to time by reality. Whatever our virtual reality was gets overridden by actual reality. This can be happy or sad, and it varies dramatically from one person to the next. For some people, the intercession of reality happens more often, more pleasantly, or more harshly than for others. There seem to be at least some people who ride in their virtual reality vehicles throughout most of their lives without ever having their fictions overturned. No head-on collisions with reality. Or maybe that's not true, and I'm just succumbing to some grass-is-greener illusion. Maybe reality intrudes on everyone.

All I can say for sure is that reality has intruded on me quite often. Sometimes this has occurred in the good grace and happy outcome of learning that my fears of disaster were unfounded. And those instances have been very nice. Many other times, however, reality's interventions into the reveries of my virtual reality have been unpleasant, scary, and difficult. I discover that I've been full of shit,

and that there's a butcher's bill of pain and suffering coming due for my having tried to escape into fantasy. Even then, though, having been cold-cocked by reality, I still don't understand much about it. Not comprehensively or with any breadth. My virtual reality might have been shattered, but it remains all I've got, however inadequate that is.

As a country and a culture, America has gone deeper down the rabbit hole of virtual reality fantasy than anywhere else in the world. Every culture has its fictions and illusions, its cherished hopes and dreams, as well as its dreaded fears, but no other culture has so completely divorced itself from reality as America. A whole slew of factors throughout American history has contributed to this condition, but the past century has seen the most aggressive "virtualizing" of American consciousness.

Starting around the time of World War One, the powers-that-be in America began manufacturing consent in the public through the use of mass propaganda. They learned that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, so rather than imposing their will by force or by appeals to reason, they used the power of seduction by massaging the public's emotions. Once that gained a foothold as a successful strategy, they never let up, doubling down time and again. Now Americans are far and away the most propagandized and manipulated people on the earth.

This manipulation — getting Americans to believe in virtual reality falsehoods rather than actual reality truths — occurs at every level of our society, from education to commerce. It's standard fare in politics. A well-known fact is that, by repeating a lie over and over, a fair percentage of people will believe it. This is so no matter how outrageous the lie may be. If you say often enough that all Democrats are shape-shifting lizard pedophile baby-eaters, many people will believe it solely on the basis of how often they heard it. Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, who wrote a book literally entitled *Propaganda*, knew that repetition and appeal to emotion were key elements in manipulating people. Bernays is considered the father of both corporate public relations and modern advertising. In my opinion, he deserves a special place in hell...

Consider any advertisement you see these days on television or video stream. The overwhelming majority of ads carry the message — sometimes implicit as subtext but more typically explicit and overtly stated — that fantasy and dreams are the most important things in life, that you deserve to have your fantasies and dreams come true, and that you should pursue your dreams immediately and at any cost, including spending whatever amount of money it takes — regardless of whether or not you have the money.

Of course, the fantasies and dreams presented in advertising are usually intangible experiences such as happiness, success, belonging, etc., but the carrot in front of the donkey is the implicit promise that those wonderful experiences will come through the acquisition of tangible products. We live in a culture where

everything is a commodity, and all fulfillment is associated with the purchase of products. Our culture seemingly regards economic consumption and shopping as perfectly reasonable and viable solutions to any problem.

But wait. However weird and crazy that is, America has moved far past mere advertising into more extreme realms of Looney Tunes La-La Land. Whatever glue our major institutions provided to keep Americans in general agreement about which virtual realities we believed has now eroded and worn away. Across the board, our social institutions have failed us, and our society is coming apart at the seams. There is no longer any constraint or even guard rails as to which fantasies we will agree on and believe. With the rise of social media, every belief is fair game for viral expansion into our collective consciousness, no matter how improbable or ridiculous a given belief may be. With a sufficient number of “likes” and “retweets,” damn near any crazy notion can become almost overnight a forceful element in the collective zeitgeist of our virtual reality fantasy.

Many difficult questions arise from all this:

If virtual reality is all we've got as human beings, then are we condemned to live in that falsehood? Various religions say no, that there's a way out of the prison of illusion — meditation and other spiritual disciplines, accepting Jesus as one's Savior, etc. In my personal experience, though, I've never met anyone who seems to have escaped confinement in illusion, so I'm extremely dubious about the possibility.

If all human reality is virtual, then does it matter what we believe? If all beliefs are false, can one false belief be better than another (meaning less illusory)? I have to hope that the answer is yes, that some virtual realities are closer to authentic reality than others, but I don't know that for sure.

What about *AI (Artificial Intelligence)* and the *Singularity* (the transformation of our species by ditching our historical human biology and merging with more powerful synthetic technology)? Given its irreversibility and unforeseeable consequences, I've assumed that this possibility — which we seem to be rushing toward — is draconian, dystopian, and not beneficial to the earth or to our species. If virtual reality is what we've always had (and all we've ever had), however, then perhaps the Singularity is the logical and inevitable end-game — maybe even the only possible outcome. My hunch, though, is that something is decidedly wrong with that thinking. At any rate, I don't find it liberating, and it provides me with no solace.

As with so much of what I write about, I don't know the answers. It's possible that I'm not even asking the right questions. So, I'm left with the uncomfortable but heightened awareness of my ignorance. Oh boy.