The Illusory and the Real

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The thought-objects of perception, which are presupposed in the common thought of civilized beings, are almost wholly hypothetical. The material universe is largely a concept of the imagination which rests on a slender basis of direct sense-perception.

Alfred North Whitehead (1932)

Abstract

This contribution explores the psychological basis of illusion and the feeling of what is real in relation to a process theory (microgenesis) of mind/brain states. The varieties of illusion and the alterations in the feeling of realness are illustrated in cases of clinical pathology, as well as in everyday life. The basis of illusion does not rest in a comparison of appearance to reality nor in the relation of image to object, since these are antecedent and consequent phases in the same mental state. The study of pathological illusions and hallucinations shows that the feeling of realness in an object depends on its coherence within and across perceptual modalities. Illusion is shown to be not the taking of the phenomenal for the real, but the overlooking of the real in the phenomenal, since all things exist, i.e. are real, as categories of intrinsic relations in the unique mode of their conception. Finally, the implications of the account are discussed in relation to moral conduct, self-realization, acceptance, and the will to enjoy a world of “brain-born” mental phenomena.

1. The Ubiquity of Illusion

All experience has an illusory quality, from a vision of the starry firmament to mathematical objects at the smallest scale. Yet the illusory or phenomenal nature of experience, which is at the heart of many great philosophical systems, escapes the minds of most ordinary people, who live their lives as if the self and world are fully real and material. Rarely if ever do they question the brute facts of the world, indeed, they search its essence in science and their inner lives. They may confess to the little
we know of the nature of things, but not a reality that is beyond their grasp. Descriptions of the world are taken to be our best approximations to the actual foundations on which the world of experience arises. According to this way of thinking, the facts of the world are near-realities or partial views of reality, hypotheses rather than fictions, not illusions that screen a reality that is impenetrable to thought.

There is good reason why the feeling of reality is so impressed on our thoughts. We can sympathize with the conceit of Dr. Johnson who thought he refuted Berkeley by kicking a stone. Even with the knowledge that a stone is mostly empty space and vibrant atoms, in other words, that the objects of nature are insubstantial even from the standpoint of physical theory, we cannot shake the feeling they are changeless solids. The idea that objects are changeless, or that change is added to objects, is an important part of the sense of reality. If an object such as a chair were to appear and disappear, we might think it was an apparition rather than a real object, more like a mental image that persists for a moment and then vanishes.

We also accept an object perception as real because we have no choice if we are to survive in the world. We do not believe that dreams or mental images are real objects for they and their histories are neither reproducible nor verifiable by others, and they show a lack of correspondence with world events. But if external objects are conceived as externalized images, there is no (knowable) reality with which to compare them, and a (lack of) correspondence can no longer settle a dispute as to which image – internal or external – is real. Illusions illustrate this epistemic problem. Unlike everyday illusions such as a rainbow, bent-stick-in-water or Necker cube, which are surface manifestations of sub-surface effects, pathological cases provide insights as to the locus of this effect in brain process. A change in size, shape and spatial orientation occurs in metamorphopsia with temporo-parietal lesions. In alcoholics with delirium tremens, illusion is attributed to a distortion and elaboration of a real object. A scratch on the wall becomes an army of bugs. The bugs disappear when the eyes are closed, so it is natural to assume misperception.

In contrast, hallucination does not usually incorporate details in the environment, the image does not change in size with increasing projection distance, and it persists with the eyes closed. Thus, it is interpreted as an imaginary construction. However, we know from patterns of symptom-formation in cases of brain damage (see Brown 1986 for details) that the basic difference between hallucination and illusion is the degree of specification in object-formation. The critical factor is the phase in the object-development that bears the maximum brunt of the disturbance. The later or more distal the disruption, the closer to the actualization of a “real” object through primary cortex, the more likely the subject has illusion. The earlier or more proximal the disruption, the closer to limbic-
temporal formations mediating dream cognition and conceptual feeling, the more likely the subject has hallucination. Illusion is an endogenous image that carries with it features of a terminal cognition. It appears to be an alteration in an external object because the image is close to full objectification.

Even if we know an external object is a mental image – what else could it be? – as long as we feel it is real and independent we are still on firm ground. In psychosis, the object is initially felt to be unreal. Gradually, the feeling of realness develops when it becomes evident that the recurrent image is the only reality the subject has. In dream or chronic hallucination, with some exceptions, there is no “real” object for comparison, so the hallucination is perceived as real and the objectivity of the world can no longer be sustained. This is because the “real” world in a given perceptual modality is unavailable to perception or memory at the same point in time and space if there are hallucinations or illusions in that modality. Hallucination and illusion replace perception and arise at successive phases in the perceptual process. Hallucination and illusion are incomplete perceptions, while a perception is a fully exteriorized hallucination, guided by sensory constraints. Admittedly, this is an exceptional view of the world. It is not surprising that those who see the world in this way, i.e. as an extension of the mind, are tempted to look for another, more dependable image of the real, such as that of physics or the absolute, or a noumenal world beyond experience.

Subjectivity pervades not only the outermost shell of perceptible nature, but goes down to the smallest parts, atoms, particles, superstrings, which are phenomenal in the sense of being hypothetical or conceptual. The most basic entity still has a micro-temporal extension that is the category of a subjective unfolding (Brown 2003a). A world of such entities is not a collection of moving solids but a nested hierarchy of categories. It may be unsettling to ponder the insubstantiality of the universe, but a dynamic world of categories is truly alive, or becomes a living reality to the observer, only when it is felt. At that point, however, the felt awareness of a phenomenal world may give way to psychosis or despair.

Illusions are not limited to those we perceive and study, but are found in all aspects of daily life. They include such fictions as object stability in a world of flux, time as linear rather than recurrent, change as an external relation between objects rather than intrinsic to the object formation and being as thing-like rather than a category that enfolds a becoming. On these foundations, the whole edifice of mind develops, and with it, the gap from self to world, the emergence of the present moment and, around it, past and future, and the feeling of intention and desire. Following Vaihinger (1924) one could add semantic class and conceptual classifications, light and dark, hot and cold, the notion of the mean, the atom, mathematical objects, archetypes, ideas, noumena, time in relation to celestial
movement, and isolated instances of animals, plants or any object. Every object is a distinction, every distinction a potential class. As Wordsworth (1883) put it,

We create distinctions, then
Deem that our puny boundaries are things
Which we perceive, and not which we have made.

2. Image and Reality

In what sense are any phenomena real, that is, physical entities or non-conceptual properties of physical nature, including the brain? The illusory is opposed to the real, but if brain process is part of physical nature, and if mind reduces to brain, mental events are equivalent to brain events, and are then illusory only if mind and brain are uncoupled. Otherwise, nature would also be illusory, and the illusory would become the real, since there would be no distinction from the non-real. Put differently, if an idea and a tree are phenomena – concepts, images, appearances – reducible to brain process, the correlated brain process could not be more real than its mental equivalents, since process and image are ultimately the same. If brain process is a concept, thus unreal, what then is real? Is the real ultimately unknowable, discovered only when we die and become part of it? Is this what Schiller had in mind when he wrote “knowledge must be death”? One is reminded of the old saying that in the womb we know the universe, at birth we forget it.

The usual sense of the real lies in a comparison of concepts and images to events in perception, not to the brain events underlying imagery. A perception of a tree is real if the tree is real for the observer and for others. It is an illusion or hallucination if the perceived tree does not exist as such for the subject or for others. The concept or image is said to be illusory if, because of ignorance, false belief or misperception, it does not conform to events in the world. We have our dreams, and knowledge of essential illusions such as constancy effects and binocular disparity. But it takes only a little insight in a spell of vertigo, when the world spins around one’s head, to remind us of the subjectivity of all so-called veridical perceptions.

The perception of a tree is illusory in that the tree is inferred from its multi-modal adequacy and, if necessary, a consensus with others. We do not say that brain events are unreal when the brain is affected by injury, drug use or other pathology. Rather, we say the brain is impaired, but that whatever brain activity occurs is nonetheless real unless we believe the brain is part of an illusory nature. The difficulty is that one portion of nature (the brain), which is the substrate of the illusion, is no less unreal for producing the illusion than the illusion it produces, while the other portion, the non-perceptual tree, is inferred to be real, though we
can only approximate it through our perceptions. The physical brain and world are posited as the real, the mental as the unreal, and illusion is the lack of correspondence between mind and world, as *phases in the same mental state*.

The unreality of immediate data in the mind is supposed to arise in the disparity of mental phenomena with the physical data that support them. We accept that mental activity is resolutely bound to brain activity, and that brain process conforms to that in physical nature of which it is a manifestation. The only possible deviation is that of mind and physical nature excluding the observer’s brain. In idealism, the judgment of the real hangs on the least immediate and most speculative datum, namely, the inferential real tree. The tree we do not see is taken as real, that which we do see is illusory. Since a false perception cannot fork nature into real and unreal portions, the mind must be forked into real and unreal “representations”.

### 3. One World or Two?

Why not prefer the parsimony of one world instead of two, assuming the world is exactly as we perceive it? Why infer that everything is an illusion and elaborate another world on which the phenomenal depends? The two-world concept is a disturbing prospect, while a separate world of categories seems less plausible than the world of solid objects evident to common sense. The truth is, we live not in a world of raw feels, sense data and naked matter, what is usually thought of as the essence of physical reality, but one that is organized into middle-sized objects that are felt to exist pretty much as they are perceived (Rescher 1992). This is the world to which we have adapted, even if some objects, like the imaginary sound of a train in the distance (Russell 1921), seem more illusory than others. Is a thought or an emotion less real than an act, an act less real than an object, a relation than a substance? These are all “true facts”, they all exist as world or mind events, but some have greater realness than others. To the “primitive”, a dream or hallucination may seem more real, or have more of the truth, or is a more profound revelation of the truth, than the images of daily perception. And it has been said of poetic truth that it begins, like love, where philosophy leaves off.

Kant (1961) wrote: “all illusion consists in holding the subjective ground of judgment to be objective”, or to assume that thought is a copy of reality. The reverse is also true, a belief in the subjective ground of an objective world. For Vaihinger (1924, p. 77) “the division of the world into Things-in-themselves = Objects, and Things-in-themselves = Subjects is the primary fiction upon which all others depend”. The partition of experience into subject and object is an important fiction but not the most fundamental. That of substance is deeper, more pervasive and responsible for the illusion of subject and object. The subjective phase of thought
lays down the self and its will, the objective phase lays down concrete actualities. The progression to definiteness is an aim to stability. The shift in quality in a progressive individuation is the basis for the division of experience into self and object. Stability is achieved in the finesse of time and internal relations. If things are pure relations and all is in flux, there are no stable existents. Wittgenstein (1967) wrote: “And here we come on the difficulty of ‘all is in flux’. Perhaps that is the very point at which to start.”

If substance is primary, change is unreal, if relations are primary, substance is illusory.1 If one begins with substance, one cannot arrive at change, and the converse if one begins with change. The distinction of substance and process, or being and becoming, dissolves when substance is conceived as being-as-the-category-of-becoming, and becoming is conceived as process over a temporal extensibility that is framed by a category, and category is conceived as a duration of relations, the awareness of which is obscured for the sake of stability. An object is its temporal extensibility. We ignore the change depositing an object in order to see it, and then we transfer change to the surface of an object as an added property. Duration stabilizes change into existents as categories stabilize process into objects. The mind chunks experience (Miller 1956) into things, selves, ideas, propositions, the perceptual and logical solids that articulate and anchor the “all is in flux”.

Do internal relations deposit objects or do objects interact through external relations (Sprigge 1993, Brown 2003a,b)? Either view is compatible with idealism (Bradley 1893, McTaggart 1901) and both are consistent with materialism or panpsychism. The world including the mind could be purely material, the mind including the world could be purely subjective, and the ground of the mental or the physical – the absolute – could be pure flux or emptiness, or a substrate of irreducible atoms. A theory of pure relations accounts for substance as category, while substance theory must do more than posit change at the object surface. One metaphysics is not decisive over the other, though in my view the dialectic of stability and change can be resolved in a process monism where subjective and objective realms of existence mirror a foundational world of process iterated in cycles and framed by object-categories.

4. A Conspiracy of Perceptions

Is an object-world of solid things and external relations any more or less real than a process-world of intrinsic relations and categories? Whether or not a thing is real depends on its coherence across perceptual systems and the correspondence of antecedent to consequent phases

1This is a complex topic with a vast philosophical literature. On the unreality of relations, see Bradley (1893), McTaggart (1901). On substance as category, see the discussion in Loewenberg (1927) of writings from Plato to Whitehead.
within a perceptual system. Specifically, the feeling of realness arises in the relatedness of contents within an act of cognition. What is the difference between the illusion of a bent-stick-in-water and the notion that the stick itself, out of water, in perception, is also illusory? The illusory quality of the bent-stick owes to an awareness of its lack of correspondence with the “real” stick. But, the illusion of the straight stick, as of all perception, involves a comparison to a noumenal reality beyond personal knowledge or the recognition that perceptions are imaginary products of brain activity and thus, in some sense, they are unreal. Here, unreality does not refer to a feeling of a thing being unreal, but is a metapsychological judgment about the origin of perceptions. Unrealness is unreality, not the absence of a feeling of realness, which arises in the perception as an incoherence across modalities.

Where is the illusion in the perception as unreal? A perception is as real or unreal as anything else. In the sense of existence, the perceptual image of a tree is as real as the tree that is inferred to be its source. An hallucination of a tree exists, i.e. the hallucination exists if not the tree, and it is real in the same way that a tree exists and is real. To ask if a tree exists without a mind is to ask if a mind can exist without an object. One is evanescent and private, the other enduring (recurrent) and public. These are properties, not determinants of existence or reality. The “reality” of a tree is confirmed by agreement across perceptions (vision, touch, language, etc.), by seeing and touching the tree as well as agreement across observers, which is also an agreement across perceptions. The interlocutor who confirms my perception could as well be part of my dream. As in waking life, a dream has cross-modal coherence. That is why we take it as real. Whether an entity appears and vanishes in a flash or recurs over centuries does not affect its present existence. Whether an idea is in the head or in the world depends on its exteriorization, not its existence. Reality is different than existence. The concept of reality presumes a match from mind to world. The concept of existence is independent of verification. The non-existent cannot be real, while a thing must first exist in order to be real, so that reality presumes existence.

The coherence or cross-modal compatibility of perceptions is not dissimilar from the correspondence of an image or concept with an object. The problem of “other minds” is also similar to that of the continuity of a single mind. Coherence refers to the “correspondence” between equivalent segments in simultaneous images across modalities, e.g. the phase-coupling of the auditory and visual. Contextuality is coherence in the pattern of relations within or across parallel networks. Correspondence refers to the “coherence” of an image with antecedent phases over successive segments within a modality or act of cognition, e.g. a concept or mental proposition that maps to an object. The former involves agreement across contemporary intra- and/or extra-psychic phases, the latter agree-
ment across successive phases, i.e. from intra- to extra-psychic segments. This sense of correspondence is involved when an illusion is perceived as false or untrue.

5. The Real and the True

In some ways our concept of the real and unreal is guided by our judgment of what is true and false. Indeed, there has been a way of looking at mental imagery from the standpoint of its propositional content (Anderson 1978). However, it seems more likely that the origin of truth-finding and falsification depends on an awareness of the relation of the real to the unreal, which provokes the individual to distinguish what is true (real) from what is false (unreal). A true proposition is conceived as a real object. It corresponds to the facts, conceived as objects or events in the world that can be verified, even if the objects to which facts refer are perceptions (including propositions, verbal images, etc.) in the mind. Correspondence refers to the match or mismatch of a proposition or statement to a perception. The match is judged true or false, the mismatch gives error or illusion. The problem is that an illusory proposition could match to an illusory perception. A subject could say all Martians are yellow, and see yellow Martians. Other people could be in the grip of the same false belief. This is common in mass hysteria or religious delusions, so that verification by others is no warrant of truth or reality. A formulation such as “all A’s are B’s etc.” does not avoid a match to experience, since knowledge of objects and properties, or classes and particulars, is experiential. Apart from knowledge and experience, we cannot ascertain whether a proposition is true and events are illusory, or events “true” and the proposition illusory (false). To say a proposition is false implies a lack of correspondence to the real or true. We would not say a proposition is illusory, though delusions would qualify as illusory propositions. Conversely, we would say a perception is illusory if it does not correspond to the real, but probably not that it is false.

Correspondence refers to the match or mismatch of an antecedent to a consequent phase in the mind/brain state, e.g. belief or proposition to perception. The direction is from idea to fact. The relation is asymmetric because thought tends to increasing analysis. The real and unreal are absolutes, not comparisons like hot and cold. We think of truth in this way. We can say what is unreal or false with some assurance because we have the real and the true to compare them with, but what do we have other than a memory of the unreal or false to compare with the real and the true to know that our perceptions are real and our beliefs are true? If truth lies in a mapping to true or false facts, and the real lies in a correspondence to real or unreal events, how can the true and the real be independently established?
These difficulties are bypassed in the supposed autonomy of logic in that logical truths like mathematical ones, or one could say like shared perceptual objects, are in principle independent of experience. Uchenko (1929) notes this common philosophical bias when he writes “a proposition is presented apart from and independently of the concrete and existential source of its birth, if there is any.” But the proposition is no less independent of the mind than the “external” objects to which it refers. The psychic infrastructure of a proposition is the system of beliefs and values out of which it arises. This infrastructure is evident in the assertion of the proposition, its defense or negation, and the conviction in its truth. Elsewhere, Uchenko notes that the relation of the content of a proposition to its unity and meaning is like that of actual to potential. Facts and propositions issue from mental states, and then, like other objects, detach as independent contents. However, the truth of a statement depends on other contents in the same mind, or on consensus, which is merely a massed perception.

When an object is perceived as false, the lack of correspondence can appear as a mismatch of intra- to extra-psychic, or a lack of identification of the perceptual with the real. From the subject’s perspective, within the affected modality there is no reality beyond the illusion or hallucination, no perception “more real” than the image. The perceptual objects of others cannot supplement what is lacking in the illusion. One cannot distinguish an illusion due to incomplete or distorted realization and one due to the failure to match a noumenal entity. In one instance, the real object is beyond the reach of an illusion or hallucination. In the other, the noumenal entity is beyond the reach of a real object. The observer thinks a person who hallucinates does not see objects as they really are. Yet he fails to distinguish his perceptions from the noumena to which they presumably refer. A person with hallucination or pathological illusion does not usually recognize their unreality by comparing them to real objects. Instead, the recognition of unreality occurs by a mismatch with experience in other modalities.

Facts are propositions in the mind generated as verbal images and subjected to a judgment of true or false. Propositions are not free-standing. They arise out of concepts. That is where correspondence comes in. For the statement “snow is white” to be true requires a correspondence of the object snow to the color white. Snow and white are perceptions. The color is bound up with the object, since shapes are demarcated by color boundaries. To be informed by others that snow is white does not add to the truth of the proposition, but entails a regress of verifications. The more observers who agree that snow is white, the more likely that either snow is white or that they are all watching the same movie, i.e. have the same illusion. Multiplying observers does not test the correspondence, since every observer is limited to his own perceptual experience. A group
of like-minded observers adds verbal or deictic weight to one's beliefs, but
the reinforcement is ultimately through the perceptions of each subject,
which may not be trustworthy. They may reinforce a belief, but do not
add to the truth of the initial statement.

The object snow must correspond to (fall within) the concept snow.
The color white must correspond to (fall within) the concept color. In-
evitably, snow and whiteness instantiate concepts that are broader than
their realizations. To know that the object of the perception of snow is
really snow, one must touch it, taste it, feel it is wet and cold, see it in
the proper context, and so on. If we should see a field of white snow on a
hot summer day in the middle of a heat wave, or under the blazing sun of
the Sahara, even feeling the snow might leave us unconvinced. Is it really
snow, is it a mirage, a hologram, a dream?

Even if real and true are fictions, even if truth is at best ambiguous
or an approximation and the real is unknowable, we live in a world that
seems real and we understand the difference between what is true or false.
Success in the world depends, crucially, on recognizing this difference.
While the terra of truth and reality is less firma than we think, there
are compensations for this ambiguity. One thing that is true is that all
knowledge involves a comparison, minimally with its negation.

Hegel proclaimed the principle of negativity as the principle of world
process and philosophical logic. The negative judgment was a principle
of truth-finding for Whitehead as well. This principle is consistent with
the elicitation of objects by inhibitory or “negative” constraints in mi-
crogenetic theory (Brown 1996, 2002), where the “what is” is shaped by
eliminating the “what is not”. In continua, points are located in relation
to other points, like the before and after in non-perspectival time. Where
we are in the continuum depends on where we begin, or where we choose
to be. If we are thinking heat, hot dominates cold. If we are thinking
reality, objects dominate hallucinations. The truth is in the relation, not
in the relata.

An acknowledgment of the ambiguity or uncertainty of truth or reality
is the first step in their honest pursuit. In fact, ambiguity may inhere in
truth if the dialectic employed in its discovery extends into the truth
that is discovered. This depends on whether the dialectic is an outcome
of what is unconscious and uniform in nature, or if the method itself
preconditions truth to display the procedures through which it is arrived
at. But the unconscious ubiquity of the implicit comparison essential to all
aspects of mental life does not signify that, in consciousness, comparison
is a criterion of truth or reality. What is pervasive and covert in nature
extends to a metapsychological judgment, transforming what is active
in the individuation of particulars to a formal principle or operational
mechanism. If the dialectical method is an outcome in evolution of the
oppositions or contrasts that characterize basic entities in nature, the
dialectic is expressive, not instrumental, or it is a creation of thought that
does not produce but infects truth-judgments.

All psychological phenomena involve contrasts: memory and percep-
tion, light and dark, the duration of the present, the boundaries of the
self, a nose on a face, a face in a crowd, interest, value. The comparisons
tend to involve wholes and parts, or categories and instances. A figure
individuates a ground. An object is analyzed to its parts. A comparison
of two noses or colors has an object or a category as the ground to its
features. The interdependence of all things, and the dependencies within
all things, remind us that we are sets of constitutive relations embedded
in still larger sets. There is an implication of such observations for moral
philosophy, in that the artificiality, tentativeness and transience of auton-
omy speak against egoism and isolation, and provides a metaphysics that
reinforces an ethics of generosity, shared experience and the primacy of
community.

6. What is an Illusion?

From this discussion, it is evident that illusion, truth, belief and convic-
tion are all inter-related phenomena. Consider the following. If a person
thinks, falsely, that his wife is having an affair, that would be a false belief
or, if it is strongly held and resistent to disconfirmation, a delusion. If he
thinks a stain on the wall is an insect, that is both a false belief and an
illusion. Depending on the strength of the belief, it merges with delusion.
If he closes his eyes and still sees the insect, it becomes an hallucination.
If he does not recognize the image as hallucinatory, and accepts it as real,
i.e. if he falsely believes he sees an insect, he is again deluded. In all these
cases, delusion depends on rejecting the data of perception, not, from the
subject’s point of view, a failure to compare the illusory or false belief
with a real object or a true statement. False beliefs can be described
as a mismatch with “reality” by other people, but for the person who is
deluded that is not how they arise. It may be true that a wife is faithful
and that there are no insects on the wall, but the gradient from doubt
to conviction, or from awareness of a falsehood to certainty in an error is
determined not by a relation to fact but by the experiential quality of the
object. Coherence, not correspondence, is the psychological determinant
of belief.

What then is an illusion? Could we then say it is less the taking of the
phenomenal for the real than the missing of the real in the phenomenal?
Everything conceivable exists in the form of its conception. A unicorn
exists as the idea of a unicorn. The idea is no less real than a unicorn
would be were it to exist as a flesh and blood animal. We cannot compare
two categories of experience – idea and object – and conclude that one is
more real than the other. Are dinosaur bones more real than dinosaurs?
The distinction of the real and unreal rests on a confusion of categories. It may be a confusion we have to live with, but at least it should be acknowledged.

I think the basis of illusion lies not in a comparison of appearance to reality but in the unquestioned acceptance of the reality of things which, down to their very core are, for many people, the very definition of the unreal, namely *categories of intrinsic relations*. What appears most real is the substantial object, not its constitutive relations. However, an event ontology (Brown 2003b) conceives an object as that category of successive realizations (acts of cognition) within an epochal present required for the object to be perceived. If categories are held to be unreal, unseen nature is as much an illusion as is private experience and the visible world. If categories are real, so are ideas, hallucinations and objects. The concept of the “real” is itself a category of presumably real things. But real things are hardly what they seem, not because they are misperceived, or because they are shadows or phantoms, but because what we observe, and what we infer behind our observations, are entities modeled on our experience with inner states that are opposed to external events, when the external is not the real world but the final segment of the mind/brain state that objectifies as “reality”.

7. The Universality of Illusion

What does it mean to live a life as if? The world as an illusion is more real to us than anything else we know. Illusion consists in missing what is truly real in that world, that is, in a lack of knowledge of the truth of what we conceive to be illusory or phenomenal. The real is what goes unnoticed precisely because it is uniform. Illusion goes deep into nature, but not as deep as the real. We can explore the real in the *as if* that underlies deception in the animal world. The camouflage and mimicry that we interpret as forms of *as if* in insects or animals are examples of adaptive trickery without awareness, pretense or dissimulation. The animal is unaware of the ruse. When an insect resembles a leaf, we know what is resembled. Nature creates a deception as an artist produces a fake painting. There is an exchange of one thing for another. Unlike an illusion, we understand the substitution or the duplicity, even if at first we do not perceive it. In illusion, there is an appearance, and there is an intuition of something behind it that is more fundamental. We may or may not know what that something is, but we feel that the appearance is false.

The displacement of instinctual behavior in ethological studies described by Lorenz and others (see, e.g., Lorenz 1970), say when intense fear is replaced by sleep, is a form of *as if* that is innate and automatic, but one that involves psychological process at a rudimentary level. Again, we
know what behaviors are exchanged. When an actor acts *as if* he is angry, a suitor tempts an opportunistic target, a politician misleads the public, they act in a conscious and deliberate manner. In the first instance, a truth may be conveyed by a fabrication, in the second, a fabrication is more seductive than a truth, in the third, a truth is concealed in a fabrication. In these examples, the psychological aspect is in the foreground. The dissociation reflects a sympathetic identification in the actor, whereas in the suitor or politician there is an opposition of values or purposes. This is more like play than illusion.

Other dissociations are less clear, for example, when the apparent happiness of a person conceals an underlying melancholy, or when grandiosity is an attempt to “compensate” for a more basic feeling of inadequacy. The substitution is hypothetical. Psychic mechanisms of sublimation, repression, defense, etc. attempt to explain how the substitution, the *as if*, occurs. These effects are closer to illusions in that the behavior is in some manner false, but we can only speculate on what an authentic behavior would be like. However, the substitution is not, as in the relation of the mental to the physical, a reduction to a lower level but occurs across behaviors of the same general type, though there is a sense in which the concealed or unexpressed is deeper. These dissociations are comprehensible. They do not challenge fundamental concepts of time, space and category. The more fundamental the fiction, the more deeply ingrained or implicit it is in thought. The duration of the present, the unity of the self, the subject/predicate relation in language, and so on, create illusions that can only be exposed by the most ruthless and uncompromising skepticism.

8. Denial and the Grounds of False Belief

According to the microgenetic theory of the symptom (Brown 2003c), focal brain damage exposes preliminary or pre-processing phases that are ordinarily bypassed or transformed in the course of normal cognition. Thus, observations of abnormal behavior in pathological cases are applicable to the interpretation of illusion and false belief in people without brain damage. One form of “negative” substitution is the lack of awareness or the denial of a disorder – a kind of illusion of normalcy – in which the absence of a behavior, unawareness of a defect or the claim of normal function, may be implicit in action or explicit in language. Denial is a form of *as if* that can be a conscious pretense or fiction, an unconscious assumption, an implicit strategy, or mere ignorance of the true state of affairs. While we are all in the latter category, there are cases of brain damage in which the absence of knowledge of a condition is in the foreground of behavior. Unlike substitution, in which the person may justify or be unaware of the replacement, denial is an inability, or an unwillingness that is ordinarily not deliberate, to face a disagreeable situation that
is evident to others and should be obvious to the subject. Denial is a universal phenomenon, common in people with a terrible diagnosis or tragic loss, but it is so common in brain pathology that if a patient is acutely aware of his deficiencies one might almost suspect he is neurotic or malingering. Often it is accompanied by confabulation, in which the person gives false justifications. These linguistic substitutions are not guesses, but occur with a regularity and pattern that obeys the laws of thought.

An elderly man with Alzheimer’s disease is usually the last to notice his memory loss. A person who is blind due to lesions of the visual cortex is unaware of or denies his disorder, as does an aphasic with a disruption of lexical-semantics, or a patient with severe memory impairment or an acute left-sided paralysis. Under these conditions, the knowledge of blindness, amnesia, language impairment or paralysis requires some recollection or “representation” of the previously normal capacity for a comparison. This is not merely a recollection that one could once see or walk, but a revival of visual or kinaesthetic imagery so that seeing and walking are re-experienced in memory. A person will not know he is blind or amnesic unless a “standard” of the intact state is present in cognition in the affected domain or in a neighboring capacity, since all that can be known at a given moment are the (defective) experiences of that moment.

On the microgenetic interpretation of continuous replacement, memories are revived in the present as incomplete percepts. The person with cortical blindness does not have a memory of what the visual world was like before he became blind, since the same (damaged) brain formations engaged in reviving that world are entrained in perceiving it. All that is available to the present is what can be perceived or revived in the present state. There is no storehouse of actual experience in the affected domain of function that can be matched to ongoing events. There are no copies of perception that can be retrieved from memory, since the “retrieval” of a memory “trace” is its full microgenetic traversal.

Denial does not occur in every pathological case but is specific to the condition, so that an account based on motivation is unacceptable. A person with jargon aphasia is euphoric and unaware he is speaking nonsense, while a person with a different disorder of language has full awareness, self-correction and depression. Goldstein’s (1939) “catastrophic reactions” in cases of amnestic aphasia occur with inability to produce names for objects. Cases of right-hemisphere injury and left-sided paralysis show a striking denial of their impairment, and often cannot be forced to admit the deficiency even when the flaccid limb is waved before their eyes. This is much less common with left-sided damage and right paralysis. Cases of frontal lobe dysfunction show lack of awareness or concern for inappropriate or provocative behavior, though when pressed, they will usually admit that they know they are acting badly.

The denial of symptoms of brain damage is a dramatic illustration of
that which occurs for many events in daily life, where an explanation based on motivation or repression could not apply. How often do we regret an action done in relative haste, even one that is trivial and not on impulse, when it is reconsidered a day or two later? How often does a writer shudder at the foolishness of a piece of writing, with which he formerly was satisfied, on re-reading it several months later. The juvenilia that once evoked rapture is discarded in the hindsight of a mature sensibility. Cases of jargon accept their own language productions when they are played back to them, but reject them when transcribed and spoken by others. We have less ability to “monitor” our own verbal and written productions than to judge the accuracy or validity of others.

The “blind spot” for one’s faults may not extend to others unless we love them, when they become part of the self. The lover is “devoured” by the self and, like the self, is refractory to criticism. Most people tend to blame their shortcomings on others rather than accepting responsibility. We are no more sanguine in self-judgment than in the “objective” description of a beloved or, in many instances, the faults of our children. Parents will defend children who are murderers, they will deny, excuse or justify their crimes. We would probably say a person is the worst judge of his own character, and even those who are self-critical may misjudge the traits they criticize. A fool may count himself a wise man, the more arrogant a person is, the less informed he may be, a beautiful or intelligent person may see himself as dull or unattractive.

That painful facts or events tend to be denied more than neutral ones does not entail a mechanism for pain avoidance. We may “repress” or forget a painful experience in childhood, or it may be vividly recalled. Not every trauma is “repressed”, and the traumatic is a small fraction of what is forgotten. Since repression is leaky and forgetting unselective, additional “mechanisms” are ad hoced to explain the exception. More likely, there is a gradient from pain to pleasure in which unpleasant facts accentuate a normal trend to avoidance or forgetting. Heightened anxiety explains the common occurrence of amnesia for traumatic events. The phenomenon of state-specific recall (or forgetting) may apply to that in alcoholic amnesia as in the forgetting of hypnotic trance.

Probably, the brain and its drives are predisposed to a positive outlook. Painful experiences are usually recalled with less displeasure. Time heals all wounds, we say, and this is generally true. Survival requires organisms that do not surrender to stress or discomfort but adapt and struggle on. The brain is insensitive to pain on direct stimulation, though stimulation in certain areas can induce pleasure. There is sufficient pain in life without the need for a brain center to enhance it, but pleasure, being a less natural state, would require such a system. The finding of “pleasure centers” in the diencephalon by James Olds, but not equivalent ones for pain, provides a biological counterweight, an antidote one could say, to the grim realities
that are the daily lot of most people. What appears to be localized to a center in humans is a bias in lower organisms. The biologist Schneirla (1965) posited that approach and avoidance to mild and noxious stimuli in single-celled organisms evolves to a similar dichotomy in humans, that this opposition is responsible for what is a truism of human behavior, namely that we all seek to increase pleasure and avoid pain. Though somewhat crude and limited in its application, this approach led the great neurologist Denny-Brown (1963) to construct an entire system of human neuropsychology.

9. Living with Illusion

The “mechanism” of denial may help us to understand how most people can live a life without morbid pessimism, crankiness or melancholia, or find fault or despair in every facet of life. There is a common tendency to ignore what is unpleasant, to bury grief and avoid pain. Life goes on. The sun rises anew each day! The presence of suffering would not seem to be a constant of life, but rather, an effect of living poorly, marginally, in oppression, poverty, ill-health, with no hope of betterment. Life is misery and suffering for much if not most of humanity, yet pessimism is not ubiquitous. The young are more hopeful than the old, but not merely out of ignorance. There is greater possibility, potential is less constrained by habit, and the will-to-live is strong. In the old, the will is weak, the future shrinks, prior hopes have not materialized, lifes disappointments accumulate. Resignation sets in. Frank Sinatra remarked that when one has lived the life he did, one life is enough! Good fortune can rescue optimism from a morbid philosophy. If life is suffering and futile, and our desires and their objects are illusory, then people also are worthless. One wonders why we are not all misanthropes like Freud, who remarked that most human beings are trash: “my dear fellow men, with few exceptions, are worthless” (cf. Webster 1995). Schopenhauer (in Janaway 1999) thought optimism not merely shallow and absurd but “a really wicked way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the unspeakable sufferings of mankind”, agreeing with Byron that “know, whatever thou hast been / ’Tis something better not to be” (Euthanasia).

The will-to-live is the origin of the forward surge in life and the failure to accurately know this fact is the source of life’s illusions. This is the core of many philosophies, including Buddhism. That life is illusory is not, as Schopenhauer would have it, an argument to overcome the illusion in death but rather, as Vaihinger (1924) points out, to achieve a knowledge of the illusion and to employ it to live a good life and help others. The error in the illusion is in locating the will at the onset of the act, as a cause or pressure behind it, not in the objects toward which it is directed. This error traces to the false belief that relations are external
to solids. Schopenhauer wrote (cf. Janaway 1999) “what everyone wills in his innermost being, that must he be; and what everyone is, is just what he wills”. This is the core of his philosophy. The will is process, becoming, but not only within the individual, it is the temporal dynamic within all entities. Here illusion consists in displacing the will outside the object as a power that acts upon it rather than inside the object as part of what it is.

The avoidance or denial of the unpleasant is a form of as if that ignores a metaphysical truth. The loss or perishing of the past and the incessant renewal of the present are a surround of process in the midst of which moments crystallize as “drops of experience”. Oblivious to the ebb that precedes and follows each rising tide, we strive for a pleasure that seems permanent and imperishable, clinging to an object that is empty on either side, as if death could be forestalled in the birth of the oncoming moment. The sense of as if when external objects or mental contents, and their relations, are accepted as direct and unmediated has its foundation in this isolation of the metaphysical point. We are the products of millions of years of evolution, so well-adapted to nature – one might say, we reflect the nature we perceive – that only an act of imaginative thought allows us to escape the emphatic realism of the natural situation. If insects, animals and people are not always what they seem, so too is nature not the surface it presents to us. The real is a covert process of creation that we mirror as spectators or participants. It is not that objects are unreal but that the real in objects is missed and, with it, the groundlessness, i.e. emptiness in the Buddhist sense, of all claims, all entities and all objects of desire.

10. What Matters

The distinction of the illusory and the real depends on whether the intrinsic relationality of an object is part of its description. The consequences of a failure to address the dual aspect of objects and of accepting the phenomenal as real, whether in the abrupt sacrifice of a life for the sake of an important belief or the gradual pursuit of a trivial one, is a life as if appearances matter. That is not to say the appearances do not matter, for an object can matter or not whether or not it is real. The imperceptibility of intrinsic relationality does not alter the appearances, but an awareness of this missing aspect shifts our focus to what is essential. The insubstantiality of things accompanies a greater sense of their, and our, interdependence and with this the fictitious existence of isolated individuals: points, atoms, selves.

We should not be asked to choose between the substantial and the relational. An object is a combination of category and process. A process cannot create an entity without a category to enclose it, while a category devoid of process is an empty abstraction. From a metaphysical
standpoint, there is no middle way between the extremes of substance and relation, or persistence and annihilation, rather one way that accepts being and becoming as complementary aspects of the real. Illusion and reality are not divisions of conscious thought but unconscious ingredients in the nature of becoming that trace to the very beginnings of material process. A solid particle is an illusion, not merely for the unawareness of its temporal dynamic. Relations do not exist apart from the duration or category that “contain” them. The real lies in the knowledge that all objects consist of a simultaneous being and becoming. Two illusions or half-truths combine to the one truth of reality. The illusory duality of wave and particle is resolved in the actual unity of the real. Whitehead (1978) wrote, the process is the reality. Process needs category-boundaries for substance (being), while substance (category) exists through its realization in process.

Keeping this in mind lessens the force of objects and beliefs, our own and those of others, and enables us to respond with deeper awareness and detachment. To focus solely on the relational and ignore the categories is to renounce objects and the desire for them as distractions from an hypothetical absolute or the ultimately real, an error opposite to that of object permanence. There is a price to pay for renunciation. If we believe that everything is relational, we may turn our back on the world and seek the real in a denial of the illusory, or meditate on dependent origination and drown in monkish retreat. If we choose this path, we relinquish one half-truth for another and are in danger of missing a full knowledge of things, not to mention life itself. We live with being and becoming, the insubstantiality of process and appearance, the intangibility of relations and categories, yet we must also live as if the categories are necessary and real.

Accepting things at “face-value” is part of everyday life. We give importance to family, career, culture, hobbies, games, sports as if it all matters. We give importance to phenomena – objects, laws, feelings – that, though inherently empty serve more fundamental purposes, albeit equally relational, to motivate or constrain behaviors that benefit the individual directly, or indirectly by way of the group. Tomes have been written on silence or emptiness that in their very writing expose the ambivalence of the author to the opinions he espouses. Books on modesty are written by authors who do not remain anonymous. A belief in the emptiness of all pursuits does not prevent an explication of why that belief is true. Were such beliefs deeply felt and unopposed by the will to live and the desire for what is illusory or phenomenal, the urge to self-expression would disintegrate in utter hopelessness and futility.

An everyday example that most of us would agree on, is the tacit understanding that certain rules or values have importance for human conduct, even if not justified by physical laws. We are “hard-wired” for
the serious view of life. In evolution and society, the stakes for survival are high. The drive for self-preservation continues after the necessities have been achieved, in the pursuit of other less essential needs and acquisitions. The very excess of want or passion exposes the desire at its core, the fatuity of the quest and, by implication, the insignificance of all human endeavor. Consider those who fight over rival teams at a soccer match, or those who grasp at yardsticks of their own progress in gossip and petty jealousies of the successes and failures of others. People rarely seem aware of the utter vacuity of their opinions. We smile at what we hear and say they are simple or deluded, but then we shudder at how far a life in the illusory can go when frivolous opinions evolve to hateful and destructive beliefs.

Some would say a life has to be spent doing something and that, except for the great artists, doers and thinkers, perhaps even for them, one thing is more or less the same as any other. What counts is passion, engagement, regardless of their objects. Whether a person takes pride in his teachings, in travel and adventure, or in his tomato garden, most people participate in life’s pursuits with a whole heart, with commitment and involvement. Some search for their “bliss”, as Joseph Campbell put it, but whether or not they seek it, or find it, or realize it when they do, rarely do they feel they are sleepwalkers, or puppets, or that life is a charade. Life, as it is lived by most of us, does not seem like a dream. The will to live is affected not by the illusoriness of its objects but, in the chill apprehension of death, by the certainty of their loss, which gives the sense of futility — the “what is the point of it all” — that now and then invades even the most sustained dedication.

11. The Philosophy of as-If

In a book so titled, that relies heavily on Kant’s views as to the limits of human knowledge, or the mediation of all knowledge by categories, Vaihinger (1924) wrote that the appearance, or the consciously false, plays an enormous role in science, philosophy, religion and life. The as-if is a conscious fiction that differs from an hypothesis in that it is a knowing illusion, not a testing of truth or an approximation. The as-if assumes the utility of conscious illusion, whereas for Jamesian pragmatism, truth depends on utility. The one claims utility for the unreal, the other asserts validity from utility regardless of whether it is real or true, though in pragmatism, utility is the basis on which the truth of a belief is determined. The world of the unreal is sharply distinguished from the world of becoming. The as-if is especially important in the value world of ethics and aesthetics.

Ethical objects are among the most obviously fictitious ideas to which we must submit. The as-if is apparent in the Golden Rule, Kant’s maxim or the principle of greater happiness. The subject is asked to make an
imaginative projection of a fictitious ideal or illusion that is useful as a
guide to conduct. Such illusions are little lies that require other illusions
to reinforce them. For example, duty requires shedding one’s egoist skin to
assume an impersonal perspective. Responsibility and punishment require
that people act as if there is free will. In general, conduct in a society
is regulated by custom or a social contract that is an artifice of thought.
When people are guided by religious doctrine, even those members who
are skeptical of the meaning or justification of a custom will endorse it as
essential to group cohesion.

Value is often taken to be the most important of all fictions. Life
without value is unthinkable, not merely because we create value, which
is only partly true, or that without value life is barren of interest and
meaning, which again is true, though in a different way. Intrinsic value
is a creation and a lure. If value is intrinsic to basic entities, there is a
quotient of will in the least particle. The world itself can be conceived as
a creation of value magnified in human cognition. Like the human will,
which is its precursor and most vivid articulation, value is attributed to
human agency. Most people would accept that value is an expression of
desire, itself a product of will. The question is if these feelings are outside
the object that is their aim and outside the self that is their agent? Or,
does intrinsic value expand the feeling from within to create subjects and
objects connected by a bridge of process from will or drive at one polarity
to value or worth at the other?

There is a difference between an illusion such as the self or conscious
present, or an appearance such as a perceptual object, and arbitrary fic-
tions such as social customs, religious doctrines and the whole of jurispru-
dence. The former are natural, irresistible aspects of mind, the latter, ar-
britary constraints specific to a culture. The former are innate, ingrained,
the latter assimilated to character to become a more or less comfortable
part of the self’s system of beliefs and values. Or, they are imposed
on conduct as restrictions that can be oppressive. From a psychological
standpoint, a law that prohibits murder is equivalent to one that prohibits
spitting on the grass. It is merely a law that can be enforced or ignored. A
law that takes its power solely from interdiction is in danger of rebellion,
for it may be impossible to enforce. The laws against marijuana are a
contemporary example. The law has to find its real strength in an appeal
to religious or personal values. It must be assimilated to character and
apprehended as the self’s own value. In this way the law is reinforced by
affirmation as well as by punishment.

The as-if is so powerful that even the most corrupt, cruel or inane laws,
e.g. against witches, homosexuals, “ethnic cleansing”, can be justified on
religious, eugenic or political grounds. Even a proclamation that has no
credibility, a tyrant who declares that all children born with light brown
hair are to be put to death, even that, can be assimilated to a value
The Illusory and the Real

The mind never has enough *as-ifs*, but continues to seek them to resolve uncertainty, conflict or tension, i.e. to increase pleasure, through justification, distraction and new interests. In the same way, the mind seeks variety in the *as-ifs* of pleasure, in conversation, sport and other amusements, avoiding incoherence in their resolution, for a failure to do so leads to psychic discomfort. To avoid, deny, “repress” or otherwise subdue painful experience is equivalent to striving for pleasure.

Take the law against spitting. Once it becomes a personal value, the restriction may be more an annoyance than an obligation. However, if the effect of spitting was similar to murder, e.g. if spitting were to spread a fatal disease, the penalty might be similar to that for murder and the two would have a comparable gravity. The law itself does not account for this difference. It lies in the context in which the law is invoked, e.g. a vaccine would neutralize the prohibition. If polio was spread in this way, and polio was eradicated, the law would then have no basis, though many laws, now traditions, such as kosher and other dietary laws, continue to govern conduct long after their rational has been forgotten. The law becomes a custom when it has been fully churned through the psyche over many generations. Its transition to *as-if* is then complete.

The law engages and transforms desires and beliefs, not by imposition but as elicitation from within. In this way an intolerable fiction, a law that is fraudulent, say that women should not work, protest, go to school, leave the home, etc., passes through the mind to become a fully illusory belief.

Ethics and aesthetics are no more illusory than any other aspects of life since value pervades all thought and action. The intrinsic value in the appearance is what makes a thing real to the self or the other. However, a psychology of value can only go so far to establish the aesthetic context of an artwork or the moral context on which judgments of right and wrong are based. The value may be intrinsic but its valence is not. At some point, standards of beauty or criteria of fairness intervene. To act *as if* “all men are created equal” is as groundless as to act *as if* conduct should be guided by maxims of reason, impersonality, greater happiness, temperance or moderation. These *as-if* assumptions are no less illusory than any others. We may be persuaded by argument, but conviction is not in the argument if it is not already in the value.

Value theory informs us that feeling is continuous from monad to mind, from passion to particle. All things die or can be destroyed but they do not all renew themselves. As death evokes awe and shuddering, life evokes reverence and wonder. Since it is easier to demolish than create, life being more fragile than death, it deserves our protection. Conduct that is life-enhancing is directed to the aid of others. The best argument for values that are life-enhancing may be that the evolution of intrinsic
value creates entities of increasing value development which disintegrate
to entities of a lesser complexity in which intrinsic value devolves to mere
energetic process. If all things have value in proportion to their complexity,
are we not obligated to preserve value in relation to that proportion? If
value is extrinsic, it can be applied or withheld, and every moral theory
based on external relations is arbitrary. But if all things develop out of
value, any attack on intrinsic value is a perversion. Thus the enlightened
soul does not seek to import or extend value into the world, but rather,
apprehends and strives to enhance a world that is literally shimmering
with value in all its objects.

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