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## Is Reality Real?



Why are we concerned with what is real and what is not? Reality is what we experience in the world, arguably with our five ‘ordinary’ senses. What about those things we experience outside those senses? Are they real?

Is my mental state real? What about my emotional state? Is my sense of wellbeing a reality or something I’ve made up, imagined? But, if I have made it up, is that in itself not real?

The same brain that imagines is also the brain that deals with signals from our nerves, whether they be connected to my eyes, my ears, my nose, my tongue or my fingers. The brain has learned to interpret those signals as having something to do with whatever exists outside my body. It also interprets signals from within my body to ‘imagine’ where a limb may be in relation to another limb or to my head. Yet other nerves send signals from my intestines, lungs, kidneys and bladder, all ‘internal’ to my body.

Language is a part of my brain’s activity and, apart from using it to communicate with other brains. The brain uses it to compartmentalise the signals it receives. It labels the signals and interprets their significance. Much of the labelling and interpretation is influenced by the way other brains label and interpret their inputs.

We say that what we can apprehend with our physical senses represents the real world. But that world has been interpreted by our brain, influenced by the interpretation of other brains.

Some amputees experience a ‘phantom limb’ where their leg or arm used to be. Their brain seems to think the limb is still there. To the brain it is real. To the brains of other people, the limb is absent.

There are people who hear voices that other people cannot hear. The voices are real to those who hear them. There are people who are convinced that they are being spied on or being followed. No-one else can see the spies or stalkers, though they are real to the individual experiencing them.

Whether I can hear someone following me along a dark street or imagine that someone is following me as I walk down a dark street can have the same effects in my body: raised heartbeat, sweaty palms and tense muscles. Is there a difference in the brain between what it imagines and what it processes from external stimuli? What is the difference between tasting a sugary sweet and imagining I am tasting it? If the brain’s experience is the same when I taste something as when I imagine I do, or when I hear footsteps behind me or imagine I do, can I be sure of the ‘reality’ of anything, whether it is inside my body or outside?

Children, especially when very young, report seeing and hearing things that the adults around them don't. The adults spend a lot of time 'teaching' the youngsters what they should accept as real and what they should discard. The young brain is thus taught what the consensus reality is. What agrees with the consensus is 'real' and that which does not is 'unreal' or make-belief. However, the consensus reality can differ between societies, thus what is 'real' depends on the society you are born into.

The placebo effect has been long established in medicine – people can be healed by their belief in a 'medicine', even when the 'medicine' contains no active ingredients. People can even experience the side effects they would expect from a certain medicine, even though what they are taking is a placebo.

There are many optical illusion 'puzzles' that can look like different things, depending on how you think about them. The brain tries to make sense of the signals coming from the eyes. Which of the possible interpretations is the correct one? Are all possibilities correct and therefore real?

The film *The Matrix* takes the question of what reality is to one extreme – people plugged into a 'virtual reality' computer system believing that their experience is 'real', but it is all the result of signals fed directly into their brains by the computer system. It is a simulation of the external world. Why is the simulation not 'real'? For almost everyone in the world of *The Matrix* it is the only reality they know. Those of us who would say that they don't live in a 'real world', would find it impossible to prove that we ourselves are not living in a simulation, because everything we experience is mediated through our brains. This includes our observations, our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions, our sensory experiences, our dreams, our beliefs, our hopes and our fears.

How can *you* be sure you are who and what you say you are? After all, the difference between stimulation and simulation is a single 't'.