

*CW: discussion of disassociation, questioning reality, mental illness, and childhood trauma.

On the Nature of Reality

Kaitlyn Chesleigh

The girl is in the living room. Although she's not quite sure when—or how—she arrived home. She's sitting on the couch, staring at the television, which is playing a show that she isn't *really* watching. It's 10:00 PM—when did it get so late? And she's laughing at the events transpiring on the screen in front of her, although she doesn't quite understand what's happening. A cat softly purrs in her lap—and she's petting him but isn't completely aware of his presence. The more I look at her, the more I see our similarities. I recognize her green eyes, her long hair, her pale skin. And as we make eye contact, I realize that we are watching the same television program, petting the same cat, and sitting on the same couch. I am the girl, the girl who I am watching live.

For years I have lived my life through what seems to be another person's eyes. Feeling as though I am not present in reality, or like I am simply watching myself live my life from a third-person point of view, is a frequent occurrence. It took years for me to learn that this behavior isn't considered normal and is actually a result of a dissociative disorder. Through this discovery, I've learned that my experience of reality, or lack thereof, is not the same as other people's.

Naturally, I was frightened when I learned this about myself. Wouldn't you be startled if you were told that how you've experienced reality all your life isn't how you are supposed to? As Lexico states, reality is defined as “the world or the state of things *as they actually exist*, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them” (“Reality,” emphasis added). This definition implies finality—that there is only one objective truth; reality is *reality*—the only version of the present that is actually in existence. However, my frequent periods of dissociation complicate my comprehension of this definition. During periods of dissociation, it seems as though I don't experience reality the same way that others do. **But my warped perception of reality is my reality.** So am I the only one living this deviant existence, when all others are grounded in actuality?

Although this may be a natural conclusion to reach, it may not be completely true. Perhaps I'm not alone in my divergent experience of reality. Because doesn't everyone perceive reality a little bit differently, even without the presence of a dissociative disorder? Scientifically speaking, there is ample evidence to suggest there is only one true reality. And I do not endeavor to counter this conclusion, as I do believe perception does not equal reality. However, I do believe it is more common than we think that **perception becomes reality.**

We can see this easily illuminated through memory's role in altering our realities. In our experience of time and reality, memory seems to act as an assurance that events have actually transpired, and transpired in the way we remember them. However, upon further examination, we find that our memories are not as reliable as we wish them to be.

In his article “To Grieve is to Carry Another Time,” Matthew Salesses discusses the questionable reliability of memory. “Each recollection of a memory,” he says, “changes that memory.” However, if with every recollection of a memory, you alter it in some way, then that memory is no longer reliable, and we can no longer trust that we remember events as they actually transpired. As Salesses shows in his essay, this can begin to have a strong effect on our perception of reality and the construction of our self-concepts. “Our linear experience of time, combined with our selective memory,” he writes, “means that as we live, humans construct ongoing stories about who we are.” After his wife’s passing, Salesses experienced the shifting sands of memory himself:

At first, when my wife died, I couldn’t stop thinking about all of the ways I had failed her. Failure was a logical story that led from my married past straight to my widowed present. How did I get here? I asked my wife to move to America, where we don’t screen for stomach cancer. I taught her that hospital visits are expensive and to go only in clear emergencies. I mistook her cancer symptoms for morning sickness. I caused stress that exacerbated her illness.

Salesses’ questioning here illuminates how susceptible memory is to change, and thus, its ability to alter our self-concepts. If you begin to only see your memories in a certain light—in Salesses’ case, through the lens of his failure—then that will begin to alter your perception of yourself and your life, thus significantly changing your view of reality. If Salesses allowed himself to continue only remembering his mistakes, and their effect on his wife, he might start to believe that he was the one to blame for her death and that other people blame him, too. His perception of reality would *become* his reality.

Like Matthew Salesses, I too have experienced the reality-altering effect of memory, albeit in a different way. When I was first diagnosed with depersonalization-derealization disorder, I was confused as to why *I* was experiencing these dissociative episodes. Every online guide I read outlined that the disorder was most frequently caused by traumatic events in someone’s past. But I was sure that I had never experienced any significant trauma, so that couldn’t be it. After spending a lot of time attempting to piece together a cause, I began to realize

that the belief I held so assuredly—that confidence I had in the recollection of my past—may have been unfounded.

Over time, I’ve discovered my disassociation may be a coping mechanism I adopted as a result of traumatic events in my childhood—events that seemingly transpired, but ones I can’t clearly remember. My memory loss is due to a condition called dissociative amnesia, a condition in which you can’t recall information about yourself, other people, or events in your life, especially from a traumatic time. Evidently, at a young age, I experienced events so traumatic that instead of allowing me to recall them, my brain wiped them from my memory entirely.

Certainly, my amnesia is a model example of the marvelous wonders of the mind—but a frightening and disconcerting one nonetheless. As Matthew Salesses says in his article, “An image, like a memory, is not about accuracy; it is about value. We fill up an image with what we believe is important about it.” It is frightening to realize my brain did just as Salesses said—that

it had the power to decide that the true image of my childhood was not valuable and thus filled my memories with images of more important things. It is frightening to realize that, essentially, the image I have of my childhood, the image I have had my entire life, is false.

As you can imagine, this alteration of my memory significantly altered the state of my life—my perception of reality—both before I knew about the amnesia and after I found out about it. Before I discovered my amnesia, I lived my life with an untrue perception of my reality; my reality was one founded on falsely pure childhood memories. During this time of blissful ignorance, the true reality was (and forever will be) that I had experienced trauma, but how was I to know that? I had no way of seeing the truth without some prompting. My perception of reality had become my reality. Until it was shattered.

Now, attempting to look back at the memories of my childhood feels like looking into a cracked mirror. It's hard to see any important details in full clarity, and I'm afraid that if I look hard enough, I may get seven years of bad luck. I do wholeheartedly believe that it is better that I now know the truth, but I'd be lying if I didn't say I missed the untroubled nature of ignorant bliss. Learning that my perception of reality was false has caused me to question other things about myself and my life, and I'm afraid I will never stop questioning. I live in a constant state of uncertainty about the validity of my memories. If I was so surely convinced of lies, then who's to say anything else about myself is true? Is there anything else about my childhood that I am misremembering? Like Salesses, my experience of trauma has affected the recollection of my memories and thus has greatly changed my idea of who I am and what I have done. I'm not the person I thought I was for all of my life. I'm a survivor of trauma, and that identity is something I will forever be working to accept.

I recognize that my situation is extreme. Amnesia, especially dissociative amnesia, is a rare and unfortunate condition that certainly shouldn't be played off as mundane or unserious. However, using such an extreme example can help illuminate the true significance of memory's role in building our perceptions of reality. While not everyone experiences amnesia, everyone experiences some sort of memory loss. And because of memory's important role in the perceptions of reality, it is my understanding that even people with healthy brains have shifting senses, or even false senses, of reality.

As we know, reality is defined as “the world or the state of things *as they actually exist*, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them.” When an event takes place, we may experience things as they actually exist. However, once they become memories, the sustainability of the truth starts to get a bit questionable.

As our memories fade, so does our ability to remember little details. And as Salesses has taught us, our memories change and fluctuate with every recollection of them—and they can even change due to what you view as valuable about them. Perhaps you went out to lunch with a friend today, and in the moment you knew the weather of the day, what you were eating, or even what your friend was eating. But as time goes on, those little details begin to become less important and are thus subject to change. Maybe it was sunny, but you remember it to be cloudy,

and you remember what you ate, but you misremember what your friend ate. By what you choose to remember, you are slowly altering your perception of reality. And over time, it becomes increasingly harder to differentiate between your tainted perception of how events transpired and the reality of the situation.

Unless you have an eidetic memory, you've probably experienced something such as this—which is completely normal! As Matthew Salesses so aptly writes, “Our memories are supposed to fade. We are supposed to forget.” But the commonality of this experience only shows that perception becoming reality is more common than we thought. If memories dictate our perception of reality, and we can't remember how things *actually existed* (only have a vague idea of them), then all realities are inherently warped.

I recognize there is a large difference between me, a person with a dissociative disorder, and a healthy person's experiences of reality. I do not endeavor to say that everyone has an equally distorted perception of reality to mine. I only propose that perhaps we need to change our definition of the scope of reality and begin to acknowledge the way that we all experience fluid, yet inescapable, perceptions of what reality is. Maybe achieving and seeing this one objective truth of reality is impossible. Maybe we should pivot our focus towards comprehending the ways our realities differ. A perpetual state of uncertainty is my reality. What's yours?

Works Cited

"Reality." *Lexico*, Oxford, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/reality>.

Salesses, Matthew. "To Grieve Is to Carry Another Time." *Longreads*, Longreads, 18 Apr. 2019, <https://longreads.com/2019/04/22/to-grieve-is-to-carry-another-time/>.