**Reality: It’s All In Your Head**

*▲General discussion:*

1. *What is Reality?*
2. *How do you decide what is real and what is not real?*
3. *Is Reality absolute or personal?*

*▲*Reality – from Wikipedia:

Reality is the sum or aggregate of all that is real or existent within a system, as opposed to that which is only imaginary. In physical terms, reality is the totality of a system, known and unknown.

*▲*Reality – from Cambridge Dictionary

The state of things as they are, rather than as they are imagined to be.

*▲*Reality – from “*The Magic of Reality*” by Richard Dawkins

“*Reality doesn’t just consist of the things we already know about, it also includes things that exist but we don’t know about yet and won’t know about until some future time, perhaps when we have better instruments to aid our five senses.*”

*▲*Reality – from the Real world

A television reporter at a baseball game asked three umpires on how they call balls and strikes:

* + 1. I call them the way I see them.
    2. I call them the way they are.
    3. They aint nothin’ until I call them.

*▲*For the purposes of this presentation I am making three assumptions:

1) that we can all agree that where we think and reason happens primarily in our brain.

2) we are dealing with the everyday world and not some scientific laboratory setting.

3) Reality is both Absolute and Personal

*▲*My hope for this presentation is to make you aware of how everyone’s perception of Reality is different – that we each live in a separate universe. Granted, there is a lot of commonality and overlap, but through the use of examples and explanations on how we perceive our world I intend to show that though we all live in the same Absolute Reality, none of us see it the same way. Each of us has a unique Personal Reality, and it’s all in our head.

Reality comes in two flavours; Absolute – how it really is, and Personal – how we perceive it. Our concept of Reality, what we think is Real, originates in our brain from the information that is fed into it by our senses, which is then interpreted by our personal history and our current expectations and assumptions. *▲*What your eyes look at is not the same as what your brain sees. There are a number of factors that are involved in transforming the raw data from sensory input into usable information.

These are the ones that I will be exploring here:

● **Sensory Input:** the five senses

● **Perspective:** how you see it makes all the difference

● **Assumptions:** the brain is too busy to deal with it all

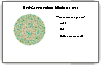
● **Expectations:** we see what we want to see

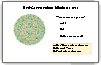
● **Context:** location, location, location

● **Faith:** not the religious kind

*▲*Sensory Input – I will be concentrating primarily on sight as for the majority of people it is the one we rely on most. Unfortunately, it is also one that can be easily fooled.

Firstly, there are some medical considerations, not everyone’s eyes work the same. Nearsightedness and farsightedness are the most common problems but can usually be easily corrected. Even with corrective lenses not everyone’s eye sight is perfect. A lot of fine details can be lost by someone with adequate, but not perfect, vision – just think of the “fine print” on most television commercials and legal documents, or not being able to read a road sign until you are almost upon it and it’s too late to change lanes.

*▲*Another problem is colour blindness, the most common of which is Red-Green colour blindness. Approximately 5% of the male population, but only 0.5% of females suffer from this condition. People with this problem have a hard time distinguishing between the two colours Red and Green, Look at the coloured circle on the screen, can you see a number? (How many in this group know that you are colour blind?)

*▲*Most people will see a 6, those with the Red-Green condition will see 17, and anyone with total colour blindness won’t see any number at all.

*▲*For those with normal vision, here are a couple of examples of what a person with Red-Green colour blindness might see (it can vary somewhat, depending on the severity of the condition). (Can you imagine the horror of being a Mason and not being able see the difference between peas and carrots?)

*▲*There are a whole host of other medical conditions, the most extreme of which would be total blindness – how would you explain colours to a person who was born blind? How about blind in one eye – no 3D vision or normal depth perception? Are there any in this group who can only see with one eye?

*▲*Even without medical issues, just the mechanics of vision and millions of years of evolution affect how the brain interprets what the eyes send to it. Can you see the two separate circles?

*▲*Does this help? The visual barrier should make it easier to separate the two circles.

*▲*How about this, is the central square moving? If not, just move your head a bit. Usually just the pulsations of your heart beat are enough movement for your eyes to send movement signals to the brain.

*▲*What is the most number of dots that you can see at one time? This is a problem of our inability to concentrate upon a large area, we can only focus on a small area.

*▲*This kind of mechanical eye-brain trickery is often taken advantage of in art and advertising. Have a look at this drawing, the top monster looks to be larger than the bottom one.

*▲*But that is just an illusion that uses how the brain interprets the data that the eyes send to it. The eyes do not see two different sized monsters, but that is how the brain sees them because of the surrounding artwork.

*▲*Illusions can be very convincing – can you tell what is going on in this video clip? Your brain is actually inverting the negative (concave) face into a positive image as soon as there is enough visual information to recognize it as a face.

*▲*Let’s move on to some of the other factors that affect how the brain interprets what it sees.

Perspective, how you look at something makes a big difference to what you see.

*▲*Two people looking at the very same figure may see something completely different because of the location from which they are looking at it. One sees a 6 and the other sees a 9, both see something different, and yet both are right.

*▲*From one direction it’s a square, from another it’s a circle.

*▲*Here are some more examples of of things that look very different depending on how you are looking at them.

*▲*The brain is a pretty busy place and it does not normally take the time to analyze all of the sensory input it receives, it makes assumptions based upon education, history and best guesses.

*▲*Here are a couple of examples of how partial information is usually enough to make the correct guess. Our brain likes to organize everything into known categories in order to deal with it quickly and easily.

*▲*Making those quick assumptions works well enough most of the time, but sometimes you really have to go back and look in more detail to understand what you are actually seeing.

*▲*We often quickly realize that something isn’t right, but it may take a while to figure out exactly what the problem is. Not being able to quickly label and accept what we are seeing results in confusion and disbelief until we take the time to do the detailed study of what the eyes are sending to the brain.

*▲*What happens when even after we take the time to do the needed analysis, things still won’t fit into one of our comfortable predefined categories? Typically, the brain will do one of two things – go into a state of disbelief and denial or expand our Reality to accept what we experienced and create a new category for future use. Which option the brain chooses depends entirely on the individual and their ability to accept new ideas and their willingness to think, learn, and grow mentally.

*▲*Those assumptions that the brain makes are largely based upon what it expects to see. And those expectations are based on our past experiences and our current situation.

*▲*If I start counting, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, you expect to hear 6, 7, 8, etc. coming next. You know the sequence from past experience and it was triggered from what I am currently saying.

*▲*If, however, I continue with 17, 12, 36, 14, 555, then the sequence does not follow your exceptions. There is a moment of surprise and confusion, you must now pay extra attention or risk missing what I am saying.

*▲* Another example of this is pattern recognition. The brain tries to force the various shapes seen into a known pattern, even to the extent of adding missing components. Most people will immediately see two triangles, a solid white one overlying a black outlined one.

*▲*The technical term for this is Pareidolia: “*The tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern.*” That’s from the Merriam-Webster online dictionary. Our millions of years of evolution have given us a tendency to like to see faces even if there really should not be any there.

*▲*Those expectations can be so strong that they actually override what the eyes are really sending to the brain. This is critical for anyone proofreading their own work immediately after writing something – the brain knows what it meant to write and it expects to see that, and it will, even if that isn’t what is actually written.

Let me tell you a story of a man on a survival exercise, walking in the winter woods with only his backpack for supplies. *▲*He is on a three day trip to prove to his friends that he still remembers his military training and hopes to collect on that $100 bet he made with them. You should have no trouble seeing the man walking in the woods.

*▲*Our expectations and assumptions go beyond what we think we perceive and also affect our responses to situations. Here is a quick mental exercise: There is a grid of 9 dots in a 3 rows by 3 columns pattern, your challenge is to connect all 9 dots with 4 continuous straight lines. That is, each of the 4 lines must be straight and except for the first line, each line must start at the end of the previous line. I’ll give you a few moments to think about it.

*▲*Here is the solution. How many of you are surprised that I went outside of the boundaries of the grid? You were shown a grid to work with and unless you have encountered this problem before, your expectation was that the solution would be within the grid. That old saying “Think outside the box” really applies here.

Time for another story, this one is about some children playing with their dog, a black poodle, at the edge of their property, close to some woods. The dog saw a squirrel and chased it into the trees. After a short while the kids got worried and called for their dog to return, which he promptly did. *▲*One of the children took this picture of him as he came out of the trees. Anyone having trouble seeing the dog?

Did you notice anything in common between the story about the man and the story about the dog? Each was intended to create an expectation of what you would see in the accompanying picture. *▲*Both stories used exactly the same picture but you probably saw something different because that’s what you were expecting to see.

*▲*Another factor in how we interpret the world around us and create our personal Reality is the context within which we encounter something. The same thing will have different meanings depending on it’s surroundings.

*▲*The skull and crossbones can mean Poison when on a bottle or it can mean Pirates when on the flag of a ship.

*▲*As Masons we know that symbols have meanings and are meant to be interpreted according to where they are used. Look at the circle with a dot in the centre and how it’s meaning changes depending upon the context in which it is used:

* Masonry: The bounds within which we cannot materially err.
* Solar system images: the Sun
* Alchemy: one of the symbols for Gold
* Pythagorean philosophy: the Monad
* Jungian psychology: the Self
* Business logo: Target stores

*▲*Our English language has many examples of words that can only be understood correctly when the context of the sentence is taken into account. It’s bad enough when written, but when spoken it is even worse as we have to include words that sound the same but we no longer have the different spellings to help identify their intended meaning. Some words are spelled the same but sound different so oral may be easier.

* Minute – time / size
* Bow – a fancy knot / a weapon
* Bat – something to play baseball with / a flying mammal
* Down – a direction / feathers from a duck

*▲*Your Reality can be altered if you are missing or misunderstand the context of a word or symbol. This is a common cause of confusion when communicating with people from another culture who do not share those parts of your Reality.

*▲*Much of our personal Reality is actually based upon faith rather than our own experiences. What we are willing to accept as real is often based upon other people’s experiences, not our own. Because of our education and past experiences we have faith in the validity of their work/discoveries and incorporate it into our own reality.

(By the way, how many feet does the elephant have?)

*▲*Most of us accept that individual molecules and atoms are real, yet we have never seen or touched one. We have touched massive conglomerations of them, but never single ones. We believe in them because we have faith in the people who told us about them. We each build our own Realities on personal experience and sources we trust for those things we have not yet or cannot experience.

*▲*Consider the different Realities of people who believe in Evolution versus those that believe in Creationism. Each has faith in their sources and believes their Reality is the correct one.

*▲*So far I have only been discussing forms of external realities, there is another set of realities that only happen inside the brain. Consider:

* Intuition and inspiration
* Personal and spiritual enlightenment
* Emotions – fear, love, hate, happiness, etc.
* Dreams

To a greater or lesser extent, they are all real, but only as a part of our own Personal Reality because they take place totally inside our skulls, not out in the world where someone else could sense or interact with them. These are all things which we cannot objectively measure yet we have to deal with them every day because they are real to us.

*▲*Then there is that grey area – the supernatural. Are ghosts real? What about Faeries, Angles, or Devils? Are they external, part of the world, or internal, only inside of our heads, or a bit of both? Depends on who you ask. Because we each have a unique and personal Reality, they are real for some people and don’t exist for others.

Another interesting topic for exploration would be, “What happens to a persons Reality in the case of brain damage, or mental illness, or while under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs?” Unfortunately we do not have time today to delve into these topics fully, but maybe we can discuss them further after the end of the presentation.

*▲*We all live in the same Absolute Reality but we each create our own Personal Reality inside our brain, and they are not the same. That Absolute Reality is transmitted into our brain via our limited, and sometimes defective, senses and then further manipulated by our perspectives, assumptions, expectations, the surrounding context, and by what we have learned and believe. And now add those “internal-only” aspects into the mix and we each end up with a truly unique Personal Reality.

No two people can have exactly the same Personal Realities. You need to take this into account when dealing with other people – they don’t see the world the same way you do. Accepting that and looking for common ground will make you a better person.

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*Bonus Slide*

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