Kitkat Dambeck

Professor Jacqueline McDaniel

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Reality: Subject to Interpretation

To be real is to have a concrete and independent existence, that can be depended upon. However, how real something appears is a subjective interpretation. Thusly realness is less a factor of the material plane, and more of the mental plane. However that mental plane is subject to study, and like a lens, the way it effects vision can be understood. In “When I Woke Up Tuesday Morning It Was Friday” Martha Stout discusses trauma, and disassociation, through the accounts of Stout’s clinical patience. Daniel Gilbert’s “Immune to Reality” analyzes how the human psyche responds to threats to it’s mood, and the ways in which it responds. In “Myth of The Ant Queen” Steven Johnson traces the invisible lines of emergent behavior from complex systems. Because reality is the aggregate of what appears real, factors that effect the perception of realness, specifically trauma and social groups, shape how one understands reality more than the objects of reality themselves.

Reality can be understood as the self being in charge of ones psyche, but this leadership is illusory. Social groups do more to influence how one acts, and understands reality. “The driving was automatically carried out by some part of the mind, while the self part of the mind was worrying, daydreaming or listening to the radio. The experience is that of arriving at home without remembering the process of the trip” (Stout 426). Complex tasks can be preformed automatically, with out conscious attention. Driving appears to have a centralized conductor, identified as the self. However when driving the customs of the road, the conventions of the social group of drivers, shape decisions, not the self. Because the self does not need to apply itself, the driver’s understanding of reality is reduced: from being present and engaged in the moment, to letting it pass by unprocessed. This is an automatic state, which reduces presence and ego; The brain is still a capable decision maker, but processing reality at a surface level. The driver understands reality only as the generalized functions of driving. This includes the idea of a center, a self, but its the concreteness is dubious. “We know now that systems like ant colonies don’t have real leaders, that the very idea of an ant ‘queen’ is misleading. But the desire to find pacemakers in such systems has always been powerful” (Gilbert 190). Despite appearances, a complex system’s pacemaker is only a label for an invisible figurehead, which does not in reality exist. A pacemaker pulses, commanding the heart to keep rhythm. metaphorically, it’s a conductor, dictating orders to a system. Social groups present a narrative of reality including order, motive, and pacemakers. Members are subconsciously asked to adopt the narrative in their understanding of reality and do so automatically. Each driver is an ant colony, in which an invisible queen appears to make choices. The driver understand reality through being this queen, yet like literal colonies, the queen does preform leadership. This conflict between reality, and understanding it in automatic states is mediated by the social groups one is a member of.

Trauma altars the way the brain functions, putting one into a mode where one is less critical, and less present with, reality. Because of this, one’s understanding of reality is dependent more on invisible factors, such as social groups and trauma, than it is upon material factors. “In a heartbeat, the present is perceptually and emotionally the past. These fragments of sensations and emotion are the amygdala-mediated memories of an afternoon three decades before.” (Stout 416). In this illustration, the biomechanics of trauma, particularly of the amygdala, altar the perception of reality. The experience is composed of decade old memories, the material existence removed from it. Anything that exists can only be perceived by the sense. When these imperfect biological components are memories of traumatic experiences, the trauma comes between material reality and the individual. When triggered, one understands reality through the lens of the traumatic incident. “It’s easy to blame failure on the eccentricities of a unanimous judge, but it’s much more difficult to blame failure on the eccentricities of a unanimous jury.” (Gilbert 146) Placing the burden of failure is easy when one’s social group is only one other person, but when the group is large, doing so becomes hard, even impossible. Blame is an understanding of causality, the quality of being the source of an undesirable outcome. Without an intelligence to connect events, the physics of the universe simply happens. Whatever influences blame can then influence understanding. Failure is in reality, yet blame is in the mind. Depending on the social context, the mind understands differently. When there is a single scapegoat, it’s easy to understand of oneself as innocent. However the opposite is also true. Both trauma and social groups are invisible factors that alter the way one understands causality, and thereby reality.

Social groups inform what is and is not credible. The range of understandings of reality are limited to those that align with the group. “Because these volunteers suffered greatly, the intensity of their suffering triggered their defensive systems, which immediately began working to help them achieve a credible positive view of their experience.” (Gilbert 148) When pushing oneself into painful experiences, one justifies the pain. The body is adverse to pain, but when part of a group the sociological environment changes ones response: one understands pain as an acceptable part of reality. The worth of the pain is weighed against the reputation of the group. Because the group is prestigious, it must have been worthwhile. This links pain and a credible positive valence of the whole experience. Credible here means believable, rather harmonious with what one already believes. “Julia had come to assume, as abused children do, that she must be a horrible person who deserved these punishments” (Stout 420). Julia manufactured a way to understand reality that was in harmony with Julia was made to believe. Julia was a member of an abusive family. The pain was made acceptable because the group was inescapable. In addition, the experiences were so awful as to cause trauma, altering the memory of the experience. This compounds the effect: the narrative which presents the group as good becomes the preferred understanding with which to view reality. Julia’s assumption was informed as much by their sociological environment as by internal factors. The product of assumption is belief, perception held as fact, despite dubious relation to truth. Social groups inform what is credible, what is reasonable to assume. This limits the range of beliefs to those that contain a favorable view of the group, enforcing this understanding of reality.

Reality is subject to what is understood to be real. That understanding is subject to manipulation, specifically by trauma and by social groups. Social groups invisibly manipulate how it is appropriate to act. There by, the reality one comes to understand is limited to those that contain the assumptions of the group. Trauma can be triggered by mundane events, but it quickly supplants the present with elements of the present with that of the traumatizing incident. In either case, the aggregate of real things is understood more through the trauma and social groups than by the what might be considered objective.

Works Cited

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