

WE EACH CREATE OUR OWN REALITY

The view of the second man is that we each create our own reality. Many people, past and present, have embraced this idea and thought it both liberating and profound. Actress Shirley MacLaine, for example, declared in the introduction to her book *Out on a Limb*:

If my search for inner truth helps give you, the reader, the gift of insight, then I am rewarded. But my first reward has been the journey through myself, the only journey worth taking. Through it all I have learned one deep and meaningful lesson: LIFE, LIVES, and REALITY are only what we each perceive them to be. Life doesn't happen to us. We make it happen. Reality isn't separate from us. We are creating our reality every moment of the day. For me that truth is the ultimate freedom and the ultimate responsibility.²

The mind does not create what it perceives, any more than the eye creates the rose.

—RALPH WALDO
EMERSON

Later, to the amazement of her friends, she followed this claim to its logical conclusion—to solipsism, the idea that “I alone exist” and create all of reality. In *It's All in the Playing*, she tells how she scandalized guests at a New Year's Eve party when she expressed solipsistic sentiments:

I began by saying that since I realized I created my own reality in every way, I must therefore admit that, in essence, *I was the only person alive in my universe*. I could feel the instant shock waves undulate around the table. I went on to express my feeling of total responsibility *and power* for all events that occur in the world because the world is happening only in my reality. *And human beings feeling pain, terror, depression, panic, and so forth, were really only aspects of pain, terror, depression, panic and so on, in me!* . . . I knew I had created the reality of the evening news at night. It was my reality. But whether anyone else was experiencing the news *separately* from me was unclear, because *they* existed in my reality too. And if they reacted to world events, then I was creating them to react so I would have someone to interact with, thereby enabling myself to know me better.³

In 1970, long before MacLaine spoke of creating reality, a book called *The Seth Material* was published. It was to be one of many best-sellers based on the words of a putative entity named Seth (a personality “no longer focused in physical reality”) and “channeled” by novelist Jane Roberts. A major theme of the book is that physical reality is our own creation:

Seth says that we form the physical universe as unselfconsciously as we breathe. We aren't to think of it as a prison from which we will one day escape, or as an execution chamber from which all escape is impossible. Instead *we form matter* in order to operate in three-

dimensional reality, develop our abilities and help others. . . . Without realizing it we project our ideas outward to form physical reality.

Our bodies are the materialization of what we think we are. We are all creators, then, and this world is our creation.⁴

So do we each make physical reality? At one time, biologist Ted Schultz was attracted to this idea but soon came to have doubts about it.

I began to wonder about the logical extensions of "consensus reality," "personal reality," and the power of belief. Supposing a schizophrenic was totally convinced that he could fly. Could he? If so, why weren't there frequent reports from mental institutions of miracles performed by the inmates? What about large groups of people like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who devoutly believed that Jesus would return on a particular day? Hadn't he failed to appear twice in that religion's history (in 1914 and 1975), forcing the faithful to reset the dates? What if the inhabitants of some other solar system believed astronomical physics to work differently than we believe they do on earth? Could both be true at the same time? If not, which would the universe align itself with? Does the large number of Catholics on earth make the Catholic God and saints a reality? Should I worry about the consequences of denying the Catholic faith? Before Columbus, was the earth really flat because everyone believed it to be? Did it only "become" round after the consensus opinion changed?⁵

What could be more appealing than the notion that if we just believe in something, it will become true? Just the same, as Schultz indicates, there are serious problems with the idea that belief alone can transfigure reality. For one thing, it involves a logical contradiction. If it's true that our beliefs can alter reality, then what happens when different people have opposing beliefs? Let's say that person A believes p (a statement about reality), and p therefore becomes true. Person B, however, believes not- p , and it becomes true. We would then have the same state of affairs both existing and not existing simultaneously—a logical impossibility. What if A believes that all known terrorists are dead, and B believes that they're not dead? What if A believes that the Earth is round, and B believes it's flat? Since the supposition that our beliefs create reality leads to a logical contradiction, we must conclude that reality is independent of our beliefs.

Solipsists can avoid this problem because, in their view, there is only one person in the world and hence only one person doing the believing. But is it reasonable to believe that there is only one person in the world and that that person creates everything there is by merely thinking about it? Consider your own experience.

The truth is not only stranger than you imagine, it is stranger than you can imagine.

—J. B. S. HALDANE

The Crime of Gabriel Gale

A number of writers have wrestled with the problem of solipsism. According to science writer Martin Gardner, none have expressed this struggle quite as eloquently as author G. K. Chesterton:

Although there has never been a sane solipsist, the doctrine often haunts young minds. G. K. Chesterton is a case in point. In his autobiography he writes about a period in his youth during which the notion that maybe nothing existed except himself and his own phaneron [sense experiences] had caused him considerable anguish. He later became a realist, and there are many places in his writings where he warns against the psychic dangers of solipsistic speculation. . . . But nowhere did GK defend his realism with more passionate intensity than in a story called "The Crime of Gabriel Gale." It can be found in *The Poet and the Lunatic*, my favorite among GK's many collections of mystery stories about detectives other than Father Brown.

Since this book may be hard to come by, here is a brief summary of the story's plot. Gabriel Gale, poet, artist, and detective, is accused of a terrible crime. It seems that on a wild and stormy night Gale had thrown a rope around the neck of a young man who was preparing for the Anglican ministry. After dragging the poor fellow into a wood, Gale pinned him for the night against a tree by forcing the two prongs of a large pitchfork into the trunk on either side of the man's neck. After Gale is arrested for attempted murder, he suggests to the police that they obtain the opinion of his victim.

The surprising reply comes by telegraph: "Can never be sufficiently grateful to Gale

for his great kindness which more than saved my life."

It turns out that the young man had been going through the same insane phase that had tormented GK in his youth. He was on the verge of believing that his phaneron did not depend on anything that was not entirely inside his head. Gabriel Gale, always sensitive to the psychoses of others (having felt most of them himself), had realized that the man's mind was near the snapping point. Gale's remedy was radical. By pinning the man to the tree he had convinced him, not by logic (no one is ever convinced by logic of anything important) but by an overpowering experience. He found himself firmly bound to something that his mind could in no way modify.

"We are all tied to trees and pinned with pitchforks," Gale tells the half-comprehending police. "And as long as these are solid we know the stars will stand and the hills will not melt at our word. Can't you imagine the huge tide of healthy relief and thanks, like a hymn of praise from all nature, that went up from that captive nailed to the tree, when he had wrestled till the dawn and received at last the great and glorious news, the news that he was only a man?"

The story ends when the man, now a curate, remarks casually to an atheist, "God wants you to play the game."

"How do you know what God wants?" asks the atheist. "You never were God, were you?"

"Yes," says the clergyman in a queer voice. "I was God once for about fourteen hours. But I gave it up. I found it was too much of a strain."⁶

You have a leaking faucet. You position a bucket to catch the drops. You leave the room. When you return, the bucket is full of water, the sink is overflowing, and the carpet is soaked. Simple events like this—and billions of other experiences—lead us to believe that causal sequences continue whether we're experiencing them or not, as though they were independent of our minds.

You open a closet door, and—surprise!—books fall on your head. The last thing on your mind was falling books. It's as though such events were causally connected to something outside our minds.

You fall asleep on your bed. When you awaken the next day, everything in the room is just as it was before you drifted off. It's as though your room continued to exist whether you were thinking about it or not.

You hold a rose in your hand. You see it, feel it, smell it. Your senses converge to give you a unified picture of this flower—as though it existed independently. If it's solely a product of your mind, this convergence is more difficult to account for.

Every day of your life, you're aware of a distinction between experiences that you yourself create (like daydreams, thoughts, imaginings) and those that seem forced on you by an external reality (like unpleasant smells, loud noises, cold wind). If there is an independent world, this distinction makes sense. If there isn't and you create your own reality, the distinction is mysterious.

The point is that the existence of an independent world explains our experiences better than any known alternative. We have good reason to believe that the world—which seems independent of our minds—really is. We have little if any reason to believe that the world is our mind's own creation. Science writer Martin Gardner, in an essay on solipsism, puts the point like this:

We, who of course are not solipsists, all believe that other people exist. Is it not an astonishing set of coincidences—astonishing, that is, to anyone who doubts an external world—that everybody sees essentially the same phaneron [phenomena]? We walk the same streets of the same cities. We find the same buildings at the same locations. Two people can see the same spiral galaxy through a telescope. Not only that, they see the same spiral structure. The hypothesis that there is an external world, not dependent on human minds, made of *something*, is so obviously useful and so strongly confirmed by experience down through the ages that we can say without exaggerating that it is better confirmed than any other empirical hypothesis. So useful is the posit that it is almost impossible for anyone except a madman or a professional metaphysician to comprehend a reason for doubting it.⁷

The belief that there is an external reality is more than just a convenient fiction or a dogmatic assumption—it is the best explanation of our experience.

While it's ludicrous to believe that our minds create external reality, it's perfectly reasonable to believe that our minds create our beliefs about external reality. As we have seen, the mind is not merely a passive receiver of information but an active manipulator of it. In our attempt to understand and cope with the world, each of us forms many different beliefs about it. This diversity of belief can be expressed by saying that what's true for me may not be true for you. Different people take different things to be true. But taking something to be true doesn't make it true.

The view that each of us creates our own reality is known as subjectivism. This view is not unique to the twenty-first century, however. It flourished in ancient Greece over 2,500 years ago. The ancient champions of subjectivism are known as Sophists. They were professors of rhetoric who earned their living by teaching wealthy Athenians how to win friends and influence people. Because they did not believe in objective truth, however, they taught their pupils to argue both sides of any case, which created quite a scandal at the time. (The words *sophistic* and *sophistical* are used to describe arguments that appear sound but are actually fallacious.) The greatest of the Sophists—Protagoras—famously expressed his subjectivism thus: "Man is the measure of all things, of existing things that they exist, and of non-existing things that they do not exist." Reality does not exist independently of human minds but is created by our thoughts. Consequently, whatever anyone believes is true.

Plato (ca. 427–347 B.C.) saw clearly the implications of such a view. If whatever anyone believes is true, then everyone's belief is as true as everyone else's. And if everyone's belief is as true as everyone else's, then the belief that subjectivism is false is as true as the belief that subjectivism is true. Plato put it this way: "Protagoras, for his part, admitting as he does that everybody's opinion is true, must acknowledge the truth of his opponents' belief about his own belief, where they think he is wrong."⁸ Protagorean subjectivism, then, is self-refuting. If it's true, it's false. Any claim whose truth implies its falsehood cannot possibly be true.

It's ironic that Protagoras taught argumentation, because in a Protagorean world, there shouldn't be any arguments. Arguments arise when there is some reason to believe that someone is mistaken. If believing something to be true made it true, however, no one could ever be mistaken; everyone would be infallible. It would be impossible for anyone to have a false belief because the mere fact that they believed

*I never know how
much of what I say
is true.*

—BETTE MIDLER

*Whoever tells the
truth is chased out
of nine villages.*

—TURKISH PROVERB

something would make it true. So if Protagoras's customers took his philosophy seriously, he would be out of a job. If no one can lose an argument, there's no need to learn how to argue.

That subjectivism renders disagreement futile often goes unnoticed. As Ted Schultz observes:

Paradoxically, many New Agers, having demonstrated to their satisfaction that objective truth is the unattainable bugaboo of thick-headed rationalists, often become extremely dogmatic about the minutiae of their own favorite belief systems. After all, if what is "true for you" isn't necessarily "true for me," should I really worry about the exact dates and locations of the upcoming geological upheavals predicted by Ramtha or the coming of the "space brothers" in 2012 predicted by Jose Arguellas?⁹

If the New Agers are right, no one should worry about such things, for if everyone manufactures their own truth, no one could ever be in error.

Much as we might like to be infallible, we know that we aren't. Even the most fervently relativistic New Ager must confess that he or she dials a wrong number, bets on a losing racehorse, or forgets a friend's birthday. These admissions reveal that reality is not constituted by our beliefs. The operative principle here is:

**Just because you believe something to be true
doesn't mean that it is.**

If believing something to be so made it so, the world would contain a lot fewer unfulfilled desires, unrealized ambitions, and unsuccessful projects than it does.

REALITY IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED

The basic idea behind the third man's claim is that if enough people believe that something is true, it literally becomes true for everyone. We don't each create our own separate realities—we all live in one reality, but we can radically alter this reality for everybody if a sufficient number of us believe. If within our group we can reach a kind of consensus, a critical mass of belief, then we can change the world.

Probably the most influential articulation of this idea was a book called *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* by Joseph Chilton Pearce.¹⁰ In it, Pearce asserted that people have a hand in shaping physical reality—even the laws of physics. We can transform the physical world, or parts of it, if enough of us believe in a new reality. If we attain a group consensus, we can change the world any way we want—for everyone.

You may not be coming from where I'm coming from, but I know that relativism isn't true for me.

—ALAN GARFINKEL

Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.

—ALDOUS HUXLEY

The Sokal Hoax

New Agers are not the only ones who believe that reality is socially constructed. Social constructivists can be found in many literature, communications, and sociology departments as well. Sociologists Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, for example, claim that the molecular structure of thyrotropin releasing factor (TRF) was socially constructed in the halls and lounges of a laboratory. They write:

It was not simply that TRF was conditioned by social forces; rather it was constructed by and constituted through microsocial phenomena. . . . Argument between scientists transforms some statements into figments of one's subjective imagination and others into facts of nature.¹¹

Latour and Woolgar seem to be saying that scientists possess a particularly powerful form of psychokinesis. In the process of making up their minds, they brought the structure of the molecule into existence.

Latour and Woolgar's scientific constructivism is no more plausible than Pearce's or Watson's, however. Not even scientists can make something true by simply believing it to be true. To show just how intellectually bankrupt the constructivist position is, Alan Sokal, a physicist at New York University, submitted a

parody of constructivist reasoning entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" to a leading constructivist journal, *Social Text*. The editors of the journal didn't recognize that it was a parody, however, even though it was filled with bogus claims that even a freshman physics student should have been able to spot. Why did Sokal do it? In an article in *Lingua Franca* revealing the parody (which was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*), Sokal explains:

While my method was satirical, my motivation was utterly serious. What concerns me is the proliferation, not just of nonsense and sloppy thinking per se, but of a particular kind of nonsense and sloppy thinking: one that denies the existence of objective realities, or (when challenged) admits their existence but downplays their practical relevance. At its best, a journal like *Social Text* raises important issues that no scientist should ignore — questions, for example, about how corporate and government funding influence scientific work. Unfortunately, epistemic relativism does little to further the discussion of these matters.¹²

In recent years, this extraordinary thesis — that if enough people believe in something, it suddenly becomes true for everyone — has been enormously influential. It got its single biggest boost from the hundredth monkey phenomenon (mentioned in Chapter 1), a story told by Lyall Watson in his book *Lifetide*. This tale has been told and retold in a best-selling book by Ken Keyes called *The Hundredth Monkey*, in a film with the same name, and in several articles.

Here's the story: Watson tells of reports coming from scientists in the 1950s about wild Japanese monkeys on the island of Koshima.