

'REALITY,' WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

by Lewis W. Brandt and Wolfgang Metzger (1969)

'This paper is based on the first chapter of Wolfgang Metzger's *Psychologie, Die Entwicklung ihrer Grundannahmen seit Einfuehrung des Experiments* (1963). We omitted the purely perceptual distinction of 'something or fulness as opposed to 'nothingness' or void which appeared as reality⁴ in that chapter but for which the concept of 'reality' did not seem properly applicable. What is called reality in the fifth sense in the book is referred to as reality⁴ in the present paper.

Summary: Reality refers to (1) a transcendental, transexperiential world and (2) the totality of one's experiences. It further means (3) what is being encountered as opposed to what is merely represented. Finally, (4) objects, actions, thoughts, and feelings are all experienced as real, unreal or more or less real. These different meanings of 'reality' are delineated and illustrated by various psychological issues.

Much confusion and many arguments are caused by different uses made of the word reality and by its various meanings. By definition empirical psychology deals with 'reality'. However, it excludes some kind of 'inner reality.' Psychoanalysts frequently speak about 'reality testing' without defining what they mean by 'reality.' Aptitudes are considered by some psychologists as measurable aspects of some 'hidden reality.' It is the purpose of this paper to disentangle this confusion by defining and describing four ways in which an event may be real or unreal (or as in the case of the fourth meaning more or less real).

The four different meanings of 'reality' to be illustrated and discussed in this paper are:

Reality¹: the transexperiential world which stands to reality² in the relationship of the pictured to the picture.

Reality²: the totality of one's experiences, the phenomenal world.

Reality³: what is encountered in the phenomenal world and not merely represented.

Reality⁴ or 'realness' : the extent to which something is experienced as real.

THE FIRST MEANING OF REALITY: THE TRANSCENDENTAL WORLD

Reality¹ consists of everything that we assume to exist independent of and beyond our experiences. It contains all 'scientific knowledge' as well as the objects we assume to underlie our every momentary perceptions. Real¹ are, thus, the 'stimuli' of the behaviorist, the 'personality traits' of the psycho-diagnostician, the 'memory traces' of the learning theorist, in short, whatever must be deduced from observations and cannot be directly perceived. To call reality¹ the physical world seems an unfortunate term, since we experience the manifest world as physical. Its meaning will, however, become clearer as reality¹ is contrasted with reality² from which alone it is inferred.

THE SECOND MEANING OF REALITY: THE MANIFEST, EXPERIENCED WORLD

Concerning reality² Metzger (1963) states: "In so far as psychology investigates the manifest world itself everything that exists in this manifest world is simply an undeniable fact: a negative after-image, a vision of a ghost, a dream, a hunch, and an uncertain feeling no less than the table on which I am writing and the people with whom I am talking, and the good and bad moods of these people and their demands and expectations which, even when they are not speaking, I feel as coming from them no less than their bodies and limbs ... The question of the scientific validity of

the givens does not even arise but is replaced by the question about the special laws governing the relationship between this second realm of reality and the first one, the physical world." Obviously, "the good and bad moods" and the "demands and expectations" are those which the observer experiences as present in the observed and which the observed may not have in reality¹. In reality¹ they may be the result of projection or some other distortion in person perception. Whatever their real¹ cause they exist in reality².

Since an important goal of science is to establish laws concerning the relationship between reality¹ and reality² we shall clarify both the distinctions and the relationships further. The physical object and the manifest object are *not* one and the same. They are merely similar. When they are not sufficiently similar we get into trouble, e.g., when one tries to bite into a good imitation of an apple. In terms of information theory the physical (real¹) object is the beginning of an irreversible chain of transformations which ends in the manifest (real²) object. This applies also to the relationship between our physical (real¹) body and our experiences (real²) of it. The similarity is clearly insufficient when one tries to stand on one's phantom leg as happens to amputees.

Lack of similarity between reality¹ and reality² is due to mistakes made in the selection and/or interpretation of characteristics of reality² which are taken as indications of certain qualities of the physical world (reality¹). Such mistakes must, however, not be attributed to the "perceptual system" which neither chooses nor errs. Nor can the perceptual system be said to "utilize" stimuli any more than a photographic plate "utilizes" the short wave light rays which blacken it and "leaves unutilized" the long wave light rays which do not affect it. Similarly, perception is no more "fooled" by "false stimuli" than the photographic plate by some chemical which, like light, blackens it.

Metzger (1963) emphasizes that "although the things and beings in our immediate surroundings actually stand to the real¹ objects in a relationship of a picture to the pictured object, the things and beings around us do *not* have the manifest *character* of a picture unless they happen to be pictures in the common sense (paintings, prints, photographs, etc.). Furthermore, they are by no means *experienced* as referring to some other, true reality as is the case with representations and concepts in the true sense. They are experienced as the final and true, ego-independent reality itself."

THE THIRD MEANING OF REALITY: THE ENCOUNTERED VS THE MERELY REPRESENTED

The two remaining meanings of reality are clearly phenomenological. Among the totality of one's experiences (reality²) we distinguish between things, beings, events, acts *themselves* and their *representations*. Real³ is what is encountered, found or produced. It is in the same sense and on the same level on which I, the observing subject, am real. Unreal³ on the other hand, is what is merely thought, imagined, conjectured, foreseen, remembered, conceptually known, planned and/or intended. The unreal³ has frequently, if not always, the quality of "intentionality," of mediation, imagery or of meaning something beyond itself. That to which the representations point or refer is experienced as the world of encounterable perceptual objects (reality³). Only after one has conceptualized a reality¹ can representations also refer directly to transcendental events. Such direct reference to reality¹ remains however limited to very specific areas of *theoretical-scientific* thinking.

Manifest dreams, true hallucinations, hypochondrical symptoms and ideas of reference are, of

course, encountered whereas one's internal organs are not perceptually encountered but only known to exist (real₁). This is easily demonstrated by asking someone to place his hand on his stomach. Most people will indicate it several inches too low. Even an internal pain is not an encounter of an organ. The non-physician usually does not even know which organ hurts and even, if he does, he does not encounter the organ as a Gestalt.

If the reader feels uncomfortable about calling dreams 'real' and his liver 'unreal,' he has slipped back into thinking in terms of reality₁ where the vaguest knowledge about something which is considered to be physical is regarded as reliable while one's experiences are mere appearances. This easily occurring reversal has its good reasons. The relationship between what is *represented* in imagery and ideas (unreal₃) and the perceptually real, i.e., *encountered* (real₃), object has always been the paradigm for epistemological assumptions concerning the relationship between the perceptually real, i.e., encountered (real₃) object and the transcendental [bewußtseinsjenseitig], physical real (real₁) object. The similarity of these two relationships has again and again led to their confusion, e.g., when discussing the perception of an immediately present thing we implicitly attribute to the perceptual thing (real_{2,3}) the role of the physical one (real₁).

We must also warn against another confusion, namely to mistake what is *encountered* (real₃) for 'external reality' and what is *represented* (unreal₃) for 'inner world'. For *you* my representations are part of *my* inner world. But for *me* they may experientially lie in specific locations among the objects I encounter outside of myself. Even if they have no such specific location in space, my thoughts and images are not experienced by me as being inside myself but as in some way in front of me. When one searches one's memory in an effort to recall something, it is more correct to say he entered those areas and moves around in them than to claim that they are in him. Furthermore conceptualizations can interfere in a purely mental way with the classification of what is encountered on the outside. On the other hand, most of one's true 'inner world' is not represented but encountered, e.g., one's feelings, moods, aspirations, inclinations, etc. from hunger and thirst to enthusiasm and bliss.

As anywhere else in life and in science borderline instances exist between the represented and the encountered. A 'good intention' may be experienced as a representation of what one should or would like to want or as an already encountered change of one's will. Can one encounter one's own personality traits directly or can they only be deduced, i.e., represented in opinions, hunches, and convictions? Or, in the external world, are the just pronounced words of a still unfinished sentence encountered or represented? The fact that these questions cannot be answered unequivocally does not invalidate the setting apart of the encountered (real₃) within the wider area of the totality of experiences (reality₂).

As the German word for reality - *Wirklichkeit* - indicates real₃ and unreal₃ can be distinguished on the basis of their respective effects - *Wirkung*. What is encountered is functionally effective in a way in which the merely represented is not. This is particularly evident whenever one's 'knowledge' of reality₁ conflicts with what one encounters. Such knowledge which is a representation (unreal₃) has no effect on the encountered reality. Knowledge about the color of human skin does not make hands or faces look any less greenish under a sodium lamp. Nor does one feel any less angry (in reality₃) when one knows that there is really₁ no reason to feel angry. The two lines in the Mueller-Lyer illusion do not really₃ look equally long after one has measured them and knows that they are really₁ of identical length.

The futility and illogicality of the attempt to base psychology on anatomy and physiology become

clearly evident from the discussion of encountered things and parts of things which belong to the encountered world and cannot be perceived through one's sense organs. Walls, doors, furniture, and tools are (though in reality¹ non-existent) encountered in a good performance of Wilder's "Our Town" and are not merely represented like the (in reality¹ existing) comparable objects in the next room which I cannot see at the moment. The patient who improved considerably by talking to what she believed to be a therapist in the adjoining room when there was only a tape-recorder and who established "a definite positive transference relationship" to "him" (Dimascio & Brooks, 1961) did obviously not "fantasy" the (really¹) non-existent therapist but encountered him. Here the effect (*Wirkung*) demonstrates again the reality (*Wirklichkeit*) which might be best described as functional or effective reality.

A change-over from encountered, effective reality (reality³) to representation (unreality³) can be observed in a person who turns slowly several times round with his eyes closed: when the 'invisible' reality³ becomes mere representation for him he begins to stagger. Similarly, the effectiveness of a person's actions makes it possible to decide whether his religious beliefs are real³ or unreal³ and whether his god is manifest or an idea. One basic difficulty in the understanding between Americans and Vietnamese results from the fact that for the Americans the soul of the dead are 'believed' to be in the hereafter while for the Vietnamese the dead are 'present' in their graves and deeply influence the everyday life of the living.

An experiment by Erismann clearly demonstrates the functional effectiveness of 'something' invisibly encountered (real³) though unreal¹: On a uniform background two points are lit up alternately at such speed that the stroboscopic motion is seen as 'pure' motion, i.e., as visible motion without transport of qualities. If a visible, non-transparent screen is now placed in front of the line of movement without covering its end points, the impression changes from pure to invisible motion because of the part covered by the screen. This is the so-called "tunnel-phenomenon." If the room is now darkened so that the screen too becomes completely invisible, the impression nevertheless remains; the point seems to continue to move back and forth disappearing behind and emerging from behind the screen. This impression remains the same even after the screen has been removed unbeknown to the observer. Only when the illumination in the room is increased to the point where the observer sees that the screen is no longer there, does the impression change again into one of unobstructed pure motion.

THE FOURTH MEANING OF REALITY: REALNESS VERSUS ILLUSORINESS

The issue in reality⁴ is strictly phenomenological, namely whether objects, events, and qualities manifest themselves as "to be taken seriously" or with the characteristics of 'mere' semblance, unsubstantiality, and of 'as if.' Examples of phenomenal illusion are after-images, pictures formed by shadows, lights and reflections, many mirror images, pseudohallucinations (as opposed to true hallucinations which are characterized by their inescapable realness), depth in drawings, and in a certain sense any picture, symbol, and name as compared to the object itself which is being represented or designated by it. Further examples of illusoriness are the *distortions* of objects seen through uneven glass, heard on poor recordings, and found in unreliable reports (*not* the things, voices, and reports themselves!).

As these examples illustrate, phenomenal semblance can be a characteristic of either the entire state or of only specific qualities, momentary states and/or behaviors of something. The following experiments illustrate particularly clearly the difference between realness and illusoriness: (1) If one moves to and fro in front of a wire cube while looking at it monocularly against the light

seeing it alternately spatially correct and inverted, the identical parallax displacements of the edges of the cube are first phenomenally unreal and meaningless and in the second case (inverted cube) phenomenally real. (2) Masks seen from the inside in slightly dark surroundings usually look from some distance as if they were turned inside out. If one walks to and fro in front of them, they perform extremely impressive real⁴ movements. In this instance the contradiction between reality¹ and reality⁴ concerns only the behavior of the object (the mask). In the case of a phantom limb the contradiction involves the entire existence of the object. As is well known, when the recent amputee does not look at the missing limb, it can be phenomenally present to such an extent that he attempts to make use of it and has an accident.

Whereas epistemologically, i.e., in reality¹, something can be only either real or unreal, manifest or phenomenal, reality⁴ contains degrees of realness. Experienced [*erlebte*] (real²) events can be more or less real⁴. Even one and the same situation can have very different degrees of realness under various circumstances: for different people, for the same person at different ages, at the same age in various internal and/or external conditions. Under certain circumstances a person may experience his entire environment and even himself as more or less unreal. This occurs not only in severe emotional disorders and under extreme fatigue but can happen to a completely healthy and rested individual in entirely incomprehensible, never conceived of situations in which one attempts to ascertain whether or not one is dreaming.

Realness and illusoriness (real⁴ and unreal⁴) are experimentally interchangeable. If a three dimensional white figure is slowly rotated in front of an equally white wall and is illuminated in such a way that its shadow can be seen sharply and dark right next to it, the deep black shadow can be made to give the effect of the 'real' figure while the pale and weakly contrasting real¹ wire figure gives the effect of being the shadow of the other, i.e., mere illusion. Such empirical evidence demonstrates that the distinction between appearance and realness is not the result of mere attitudes, interpretations, and judgements (which are unreal³) but that this distinction is encountered (real³). Otherwise a transposition of these characteristics could not occur in the face of better knowledge. Thus it is possible to make a clearcut distinction between directly encountered (real³) characteristics of realness or illusoriness and the corresponding, purely ideational (unreal³) convictions or judgements based on common sense knowledge or on special considerations.

Reality⁴ with its various degrees of realness applies not only to thing perception. In person perception faces, postures, and movements, tone of voice and handwritings may be experienced as expressing true (real⁴), questionable, or clearly false (unreal⁴) joy, enthusiasm, firmness, even anger, etc. The contrast may take quite different forms. It may be between a genuine and an insincere expression (empty formalities, social amenities, pretense, hypocrisy, lying), between natural and affected behavior, between being serious and joking, between actual and 'acted' actions (to play a role, to attribute a role to something, to do merely as an exercise, to show or indicate how something is to be done), etc.

The difference between what is real⁴ and what is less or not at all real⁴ exists not only for what is presently encountered (real³) but also for what is merely represented (unreal³). In terms of one's experiences and actions it is of paramount importance to distinguish between representations (ideas and imagery) related to facts, i.e., representations with the characteristics of knowledge, memories, and expectations, and those representations appearing as mere associations, dreams, daydreams, and thoughts in the narrower sense. The former refer to what actually is, has happened or will occur with or without one's own contribution. The latter do not seem to have

any counter-part in the physical world (reality¹). On the borderline between the real⁴ and the unreal⁴ representations lie hunches about possibilities and plans for the future. Both positive and negative errors (according to reality¹) can occur: involuntary plagiarism (kryptomnesia), i.e., apparently new ideas which are actually memories (cf. Brandt, 1959; Menninger, 1960), *deja vu* experiences, i.e., apparent memories which cannot be traced back to past events, and disappointed expectations.

The realness of representations can also change. What one believed to be a memory of an actual event turns out to be only that of a story one once heard (for a fascinating example, cf. Piaget, 1951, fn, p. 188). Dreams which at the time of their occurrence are not only real³ because they are encountered but also real⁴ lose their realness (real⁴) upon awakening. This loss is not attributable merely to their becoming representations (unreal³). Most events are not less real⁴ when they become unreal³, i.e., memories, than they were while they were still real³. Ordinary memories do not have any quality of illusoriness.

Except for memories of events which were originally encountered as unreal⁴, e.g., the memory of an unconvincing act by a magician, the opposite of reality⁴ is for representations not illusoriness but the zero on a scale of what is not real⁴, what is outside of the real and what is neutral to the question of reality. The *degree* of realness can vary all the more among representations. Several factors account for greater or lesser realness of a representation. Two of these are temporal and spatial distance. The further away a represented event is in time - either in the past or in the future - and/or in space the less real⁴ is it. The increase of degree of realness of a contemplated wedding becomes clear as it moves from the distant future to next summer to next week to an hour from now and finally begins, its decrease in realness as it moves from being just over to being "hardly any longer true." Correspondingly, a fire in another part of town is more real⁴ than one in a distant city - unless one is more familiar with the respective area in the distant city than with the part of one's town where the fire is. Thus, familiarity is a third factor accounting for realness. Still another factor bearing upon the degree of realness of specifically past events is whether or not they still exert effects upon present happenings. The realness of future events depends correspondingly on the certainty or improbability of their occurring. A given goal is the more real⁴ the easier it seems to reach.

Of particular importance for education are the factors involved in degrees of realness of practical knowledge. The extent to which the student can make use of what he has learned depends on how real⁴ the acquired knowledge is to him. It seems to be for this reason that skills are best learned by "watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example" (Polanyi, 1964). Knowledge (representations) acquired through imitation or even through mere observation is based on earlier real³ experiences [*Erfahrungen*] whereas knowledge acquired from verbal instructions consists of memories of what were always mere representations, i.e., unreal³. Thus concepts formed in the laboratory are based on reality³, those derived from pure lectures or from readings on unreality³ (cf. Vygotsky, 1962).

How real⁴ knowledge derived from lectures and readings becomes depends on its sources. If reports are isolated and general their contents are less real⁴ than when they are cumulative and detailed.

The degree of realness of one's own feelings, ideas [*Einfälle*], conclusions, wishes, intentions, and even completed actions has been shown to depend on whether they are still one's unspoken secret or have already been shared with others and thus entered their world and become

somehow 'irrevocable.' The varying degrees of realness of a future wedding depend in addition to its temporal and spatial distance on whether one thinks by oneself of the possibility of a marriage, discusses it with the beloved, talks seriously about it to one's friends, parents, prospective in-laws or announce it in the newspaper. In all these instances the wedding is unreal¹, real², unreal³ and to different degrees real⁴.

While the degree of realness of a representation is in part a function of to whom and how it has been communicated - by gesture, insinuation, or detailed explanation - representations can change in degree of realness even without being disclosed. As Freud already pointed out naming something makes it more real (cf. Brandt, 1961). As one labels in one's own mind a gift as 'bribe' or a pain as an 'ulcer' the representation becomes more real⁴.

Not only can one encounter and represent individual objects in various gradations of realness but one can even live and move around in areas of illusoriness. This occurs when one creates a novel, builds castles in the air, reminisces, or indulges in daydreams.

The Gestalt concept of 'common fate' helps to elucidate the conditions which are responsible for phenomenal reality⁴. The phenomenally real⁴ has a common fate with the encountered surroundings. What is experienced as unreal⁴ has a common fate with the observer but is not physically part of him. The encountered but phenomenally unreal⁴ (e.g., an after-image) is anchored in the observer and not in his environment and may continue even after he closes his eyes. A glove in a closed drawer or which one has lost is real⁴ while a glove in my fantasy is unreal⁴ because the former has a common fate with the environment and the latter with my thoughts. A shadow and a mirror image which are also unreal⁴ do, obviously, not have a common fate with the observer but they also have no independent existence. Their existence is derived from something else of which they are the shadow and the mirror image. In general then, illusoriness (unreality⁴) may be accounted for by *derived existence*.

CONCLUSION

In presenting Metzger's four meanings of 'reality' to American psychologists we have attempted to fill a real^{1,2,3,4} gap. This gap is real¹ because there has so far been no translation or discussion of Metzger's ideas in the American scientific literature. It is real² because Brandt became aware of this gap when he based his psychology courses on Metzger's conceptualizations and found that there was no discussion in English to which students could be referred. As Brandt encountered this lack the gap became real³. The more students and colleagues asked where they could read up on what Brandt had presented in lectures the more real⁴ the gap became. The fact that the gap will be only partially filled by this paper and that the need for a full translation of Metzger's *Psychologie* will be experienced by many readers supports Brandt's impression that Metzger's fourth reality (cf. Footnote 1) contains gradations as does reality⁴.

In distinguishing different meanings of 'reality' Metzger did much more than bring clarity into an area of semantic confusion. He created a new basis for the study of human psychology. Metzger's conceptualizations open the way for a fresh approach to the investigation of the relationship between physiology (reality¹) and psychology (reality²) and of the interrelationship between various psychological phenomena. [Concerning the need for a fresh approach cf. Holzkamp (1964). For an application of Metzger's concepts cf. Brandt (1967).]

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