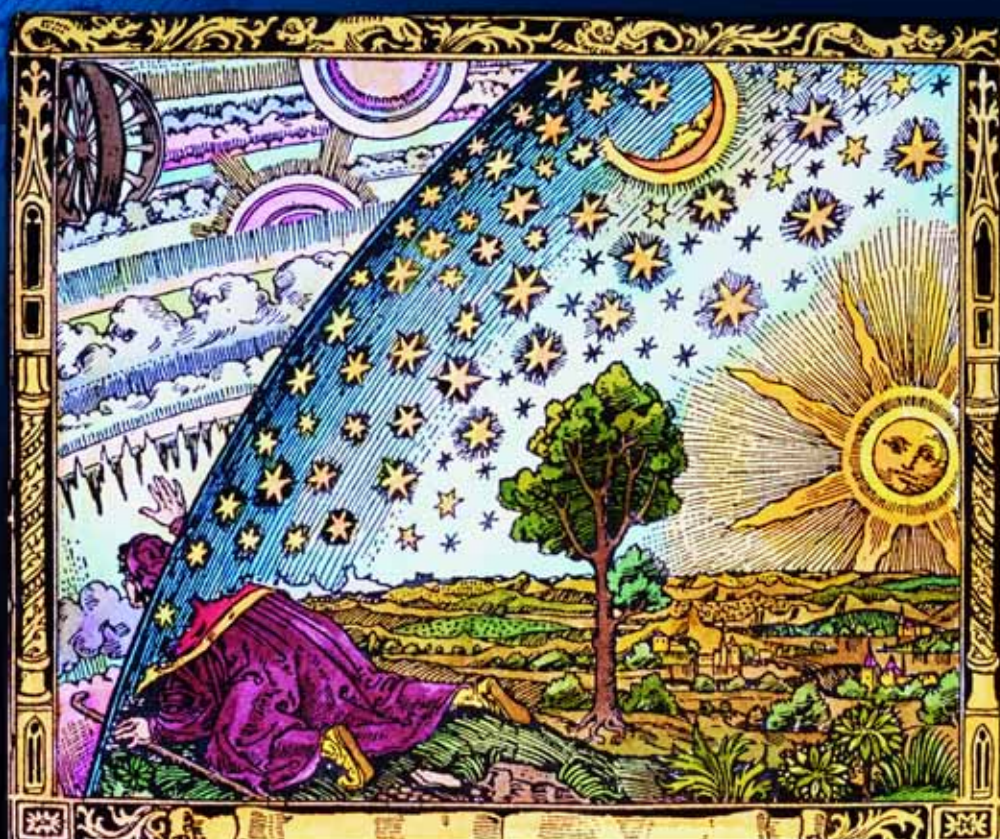
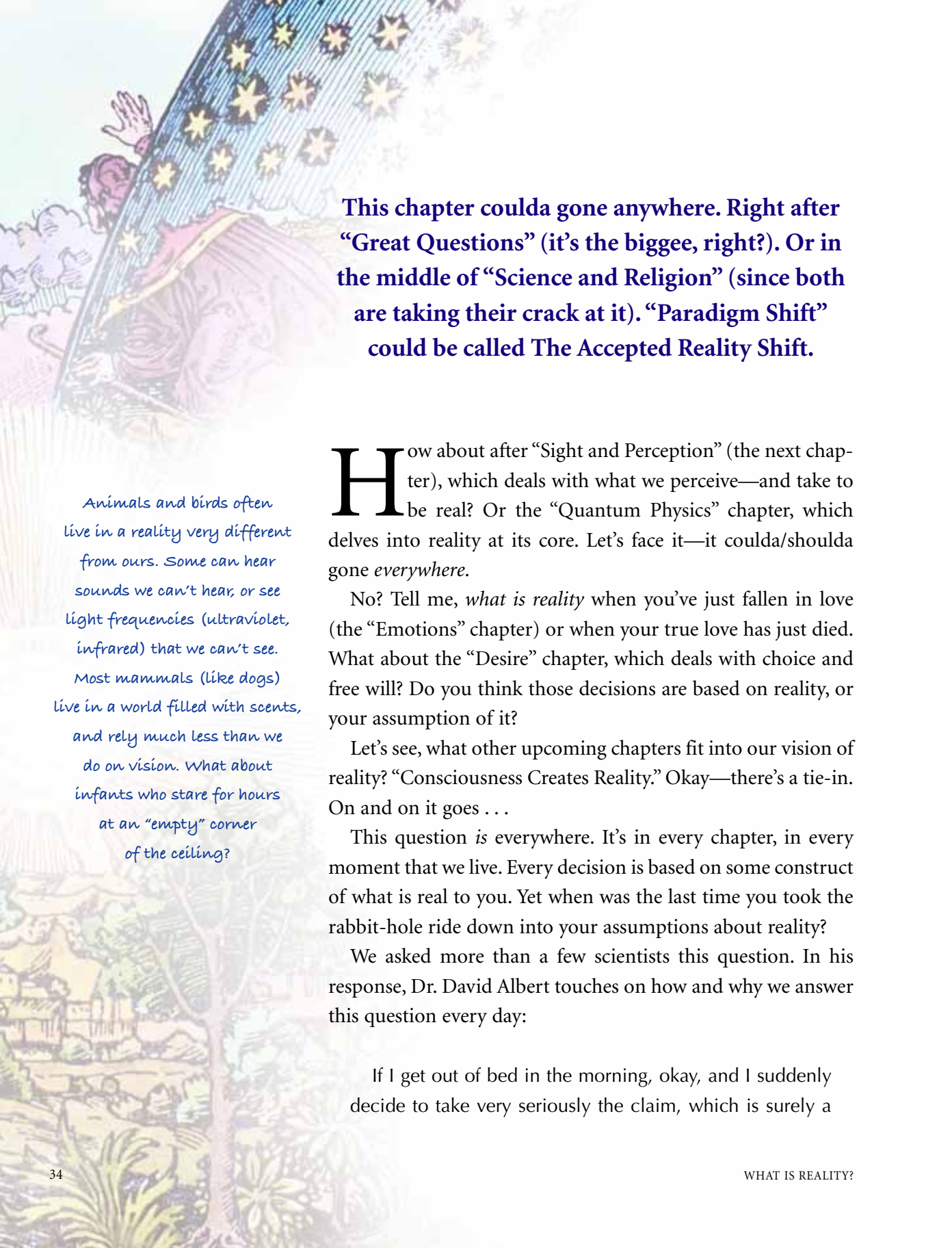


WHAT IS REALITY?

What I thought was unreal now, for me, seems in some ways to be more real than what I think to be real, which seems now to be unreal.

FRED ALAN WOLF





This chapter coulda gone anywhere. Right after “Great Questions” (it’s the biggee, right?). Or in the middle of “Science and Religion” (since both are taking their crack at it). “Paradigm Shift” could be called The Accepted Reality Shift.

Animals and birds often live in a reality very different from ours. Some can hear sounds we can’t hear, or see light frequencies (ultraviolet, infrared) that we can’t see. Most mammals (like dogs) live in a world filled with scents, and rely much less than we do on vision. What about infants who stare for hours at an “empty” corner of the ceiling?

How about after “Sight and Perception” (the next chapter), which deals with what we perceive—and take to be real? Or the “Quantum Physics” chapter, which delves into reality at its core. Let’s face it—it coulda/shoulda gone *everywhere*.

No? Tell me, *what is reality* when you’ve just fallen in love (the “Emotions” chapter) or when your true love has just died. What about the “Desire” chapter, which deals with choice and free will? Do you think those decisions are based on reality, or your assumption of it?

Let’s see, what other upcoming chapters fit into our vision of reality? “Consciousness Creates Reality.” Okay—there’s a tie-in. On and on it goes . . .

This question *is* everywhere. It’s in every chapter, in every moment that we live. Every decision is based on some construct of what is real to you. Yet when was the last time you took the rabbit-hole ride down into your assumptions about reality?

We asked more than a few scientists this question. In his response, Dr. David Albert touches on how and why we answer this question every day:

If I get out of bed in the morning, okay, and I suddenly decide to take very seriously the claim, which is surely a

true claim . . . that I don't know for sure if my eyes are working correctly, so that for all I know even though it looks like there's a stable floor by the side of my bed, there might be a cliff or something like that. If I am unable to order those possibilities in terms of probabilities that I assign to them, then I'm not gonna get out of bed! Seems to me I'm paralyzed in the most literal sense of the word.

One hypothesis is there really is a floor there, and that's what I'm seeing. Another hypothesis is my seeing the floor is a hallucination, and there's a cliff there. By getting out of bed in the morning, you endorse one of those hypotheses as more likely than another. That's the way we're used to proceeding in our ordinary lives.

We endorse the reality that our eyes give us, so for us in that moment we answered the question looming above us—What is reality? Most people think reality is what our senses project to us. And, of course, science has gone along with that view for 400 years: If it is not perceivable by our five senses (or their extensions), it's not real.

But even this “reality” appears one way when we look at it with our eyes, and another if we look more deeply into it with a microscope or an atom smasher. Then it becomes totally different, unrecognizable.

And what about our thoughts? Are they part of “reality”? Take a look around right now. There are windows and chairs and lights and this book. You probably thought they were all real. All of them were preceded by an “idea” of windows and chairs. Someone imagined those windows and chairs and created them. So if the latter is real, is the idea real as well? Most people think thoughts and emotions are real—but when scientists explore “reality,” they carefully avoid talking about such things.

What about consciousness, the fundamental fact of our own existence, that goes with us wherever we go? In order to do anything, to think, to dream, to create, to perceive, we have to be conscious. Isn't that part of reality? But where is it? What is it made of? Unlike material objects, intangible phenomena like consciousness can't be measured, but that doesn't mean they're not “real,” or does it?

Many scientists are in a real pickle on this one. If it's real, then its reality can be examined; if it's not real, then they never have to go looking for it. And thus it will never be known as real.

So, “What is Real?”—possibly our most common question— isn't easy to answer. And yet who we are, what life is, what is possible and what is not, is all based on what we think is real.

—WILL

Back to the Laboratory!

I never questioned reality. Why would I do something as silly as that? Then the reality I was in became a mess, and I began to question my reality—not necessarily the tables and chairs, but my perception of it. Once I realized that my reality was only the construct of my limitations, I realized I had to be willing to dream outside of them. What is it that I truly desire that I don't believe I can have or become? The only thing "solid" in my reality is my perception of it. If I am willing to open my eyes to new possibilities, my reality can change.

—BETSY

Having not come up with the answer to “What is reality?”—which turned out to be way too big a question—humanity turned to the lab and tackled a simpler aspect: Take all the “stuff” around us, which we all pretty well agree is “real,” and see what that’s made of. That’s much simpler than dreams or ideas or emotions or any of that inner stuff.

It was the Greek philosopher Democritus of Abdera who first had the idea of an atom: “Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.” And that was a great place to start. So out came the electron microscopes and atom smashers and cloud chambers, and we big people peered into the world of the little things.

Now when you went to school, you probably were shown a model of an atom, with its solid nucleus and orbiting electrons, and you were probably told, “Atoms are the building blocks of nature.” Nice try! It’s a neat concept and diagrams quite nicely, but it just ain’t so.

It turned out that those solid little atoms, in their neat little orbits, were really just energy packets. Then it was discovered that they’re not really energy packets either, but momentary condensations of a field of energy. . . . Of course, as you know, every “atom” consists almost entirely of “empty space,” so much so that it’s a kind of miracle that we don’t hit the floor every time we try to sit down on a chair. And since the floor is also mostly empty, where would we find something solid enough to hold us? The kicker here is that “we”—at least our bodies—are made up of atoms, too!

And now leading-edge research is suggesting that the so-called “empty space” within and between atoms is not empty at all; it’s so lively with energy that one cubic centimeter—about a thimbleful or an area the size of a marble—contains more energy than all the solid matter in the entire known universe!

So what did you say Reality was?

Going Deeper

Long before the early Greek philosophers—and certainly long before quantum physicists—the sages of India knew that there was something important going on beyond the realm of the senses. Both Hindu and Buddhist seers taught, and still teach, that the world of appearances, the world we see with our senses, is *maya*, or illusion, and that something underlies this material realm, something that is more powerful and more fundamental, more “real” even though it’s completely intangible. As so many spiritual texts suggest, there is a “higher reality” that is more fundamental than the material universe is, and it has something to do with consciousness.

This is precisely what quantum physics is revealing. It suggests that at the core of the physical world there is a completely non-physical realm, whether we call it information, probability waves or consciousness. And just as we commonly say that atoms are what things are “really” made of, if this view is correct, we would have to say that this underlying field of intelligence is, deep down, what the universe “really” is.

NASA astronaut Dr. Edgar Mitchell came to this conclusion on his return trip from space:

In one moment I realized that this universe is intelligent. It is proceeding in a direction, and we have something to do with that direction. And that creative spirit, the creative intent that has been the history of this planet, comes from within us, and it is out there—it is all the same . . .

Consciousness itself is what is fundamental, and energy-matter is the product of consciousness . . . If we change our heads about who we are—and can see ourselves as creative, eternal beings creating physical experience, joined at that level of existence we call consciousness—then we start to see and create this world that we live in quite differently.¹

¹ Which Dr. Mitchell did. He landed and created the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) as a research institute to scientifically investigate his and others’ “mystical” perceptions about reality.



There is essentially nothing to matter whatsoever—it's completely insubstantial. The most solid thing you could say about all this insubstantial matter is that it's more like a thought; it's like a concentrated bit of information.

—Jeffrey Satinover, M.D.

The Possibly Greater/Truer Reality of Consciousness

I've noticed that some people sometimes think that asking questions like "What is reality?" is pointless and that it doesn't deal with day-to-day realities. But let's suppose for a moment that our world "out there" is constructed by our perception. How do we alter the foundation that is creating that world? Do we try and change the things "out there" in the world? Well, that's what most of us keep doing, and it never works. Ever tried to run away from a situation and find that your problems followed you? Well, of course they did. That's because you don't leave your nervous system behind. You still react the same way to the same old stimuli. So what's a better way? Know this: **Reality has everything to do with us.**

—MARK

Mitchell's realization parallels the experience of mystics throughout the ages, right up to today. Andrew Newberg, M.D., has studied the mystical/spiritual experience from the point of view of neuroscience and written about it in *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* and *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Belief*. He says that people who have a deep mystical experience and then "come back" to the ordinary world "still perceive that reality to be more real, to represent the truer, more fundamental form of reality; the material world that we live in is a more secondary reality for them."

Because of this, Dr. Newberg says, "We need to really look at the relationship between consciousness and material reality. . . . Whether or not the material world can actually be derived from a conscious reality or whether consciousness, itself, could even be the fundamental stuff of the universe."

Can We Ever Really Know?

In the 18th century, the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant pointed out that human beings can never truly know the nature of reality *as it is*. Our investigations only provide answers to the questions we ask, which are based on the capabilities and limitations of our minds. Everything we perceive in the natural world (whether with our senses or through science) comes through the filter of our consciousness, and is determined, at least to some extent, by the mind's own structures. Thus, what we see are "phenomena," that is, the interactions between the mind and whatever is "really out there." We don't see reality; we only see our construction of reality, built up by the neurons of our brains. The "thing-in-itself" is forever hidden from us.

To put it another way, science only gives us *models* of the world, not the world itself. As Miceal Ledwith says:

Well, you know, the quantum view of reality is not the be-all and the end-all. All we're trying to do in the history of science is to produce less and less imperfect models to express the nature of what exists and, of course, in maybe twenty or thirty years' time quantum physics will be replaced by a deeper and more profound understanding of reality, whatever that particular physics will be named.

And after science gives us those models, there is still the "us" to deal with, as Dr. Andrew Newberg points out:

As far as whether or not we're just living in a big holodeck, it's a question that we don't necessarily have a good answer to. I think this is a big philosophical problem that we have to deal with, in terms of what science can say about our world, because we are always the observer in science. We are always constrained by what is ultimately coming into our human brain that allows us to see and perceive the things that we do. So, it is conceivable that all of this is just a great illusion that we have no way of getting outside of to see what is really out there.

Levels of Reality

One piece of information that can be very helpful in dealing with mind-bending questions about the nature of reality is the idea that there are *different levels* existing simultaneously, and that all of them are real. In other words, the surface levels are real in their own right; it's only when we compare them to deeper levels that we say they are not really real; they are not the "ultimate" level. Arms and legs are real; cells and molecules are real; atoms and electrons are real. And consciousness is real. As Dr. John Hagelin says:

There literally are different worlds in which we live. There's surface truth, and there's deep truth. There's the macroscopic world that we see, there's the world of ourselves, there's the

I remember first running into the idea that we create reality in our minds, and that the "physical" world is just a construct. I had just read *Nature of Personal Reality* by Jane Roberts. So I closed my eyes and thought the wall in front of me wasn't real and that when I opened my eyes I would see through it. Didn't work. Or did it?

Sure, I had been holding the idea in my mind that the wall didn't exist, but everything about the way I sat there, expecting to be held up by the floor, being pulled by gravity, all supported the worldview that the world was the realest thing there is. When I get out of bed in the morning and put my feet down, I truly believe that the floor is real and not an illusion, and there's not really a bottomless pit there.

Every action we do assumes something about reality. Still, we seldom consciously ask it. We assume it, and reality complies, and so we never see the hand that makes it. There's a Zen question here somewhere. "What is the sound of one reality collapsing?"

—WILL

world of our atoms, the world of our nuclei. These are each totally different worlds.

They have their own language; they have their own mathematics. They're not just smaller; each is totally different, but they're complementary because I am my atoms, but I am also my cells. I'm also my macroscopic physiology. It's all true. They're just different levels of truth.

So:

1. It's all true.
2. None of it is true—there are only *models*.
3. *We* cannot ever get out of our own way to perceive the *all*.
4. By expanding our awareness, we can perceive the *all*.
5. *All* of the above are true.
6. *All* of the above are models.
7. *Or . . .*

The easy answer to the question as to whether reality is illusory and it's really all fuzzy like all probabilities . . . would be yes. So if somebody came up to me and asked that question, I'd say yes, that's basically right. But it's more complicated than that because at the moment that you interact with reality, it does come into absolutely rock solid existence. It's only fuzzy when you're not interacting with it.

—Jeffrey Satinover, M.D.

Is Reality a Democratic Process?

In our day-to-day lives, in our moment-by-moment decision about reality, is it simply democratic? Or to put it another way, at what point in agreement from those around us does something become real? If there are ten people in a room, and eight see a chair and two see a Martian, who is delusional?

If twelve people see a lake as a body of water, and one person sees it as solid enough to walk on, who is delusional?

Going back a chapter, we could say a paradigm is simply the most commonly accepted notion (model) about what is real. We vote with our actions, and that becomes real.

So the kicker to all this is: Does consciousness create reality? Is that why no one has ever come up with a good answer—because reality IS the answer?

Ponder These for a While . . .

- What are your assumptions of reality? What's the most basic one you make every day?
- Have you ever thought about what thoughts are made of?
- Can you give an example of how your thoughts become reality?
- Was writing an answer to the preceding question an example?
- What are dreams? If both dreaming and perception are primarily brain activities, why would you think that the outside world was more real?
- Which state feels more real?
- What is the difference between reality and your perception of it?
- How will changing your paradigm change your perception of reality?
- Is it possible to change your perception of reality without changing your paradigm?
- What color are your glasses now?