

Illusions of Self

Evolution was not very rational in designing our eyes - the optic nerve loops in front of the retina creating a blind spot that we almost never see. The brain fills in the missing details from the background, so most of the time we don't realize that there is a hole in our vision.

Flash a red light in one place and then a green light a short distance away; the light will appear to move from one point to the other changing from red to green around the midpoint. The apparent movement of the light is not surprising – this is how we see movement in animated cartoons. But how does the brain know halfway thru that the light is about to change to green? Could the light not just as easily change to blue, yellow or magenta? No, this is not evidence of a psychic ability to foretell the future. Numerous experiments have shown that we cannot predict randomly generated light colors to a degree greater than would be expected by chance. What is happening is even more disturbing. The green light was already on before the red light registered in our conscious awareness.

Like 'live' broadcasts from sporting events, there is a short time delay between the actual event and our perceiving it. We receive all kinds of sensory inputs but we are not aware of them. Our conscious mind selects, orders, censors and interprets them before what we see, hear or feel reaches our awareness. As far as our brain is concerned, the moving light must have changed somewhere between the two points because it was red when it started and green when it ended – our brain automatically fills in the missing, but wrong, details.

In suggesting that the brain fools us into seeing things in a certain way, I am engaging in another of the brain's illusions. Who is the "we" that is being fooled? Is there a little person inside our heads watching events on a tiny screen in our heads? And if there was such a being inside our heads, would there not have to be an even smaller being inside his head watching events on an even smaller screen and so on, with an endless stream of smaller and smaller persons? There can be no such little person.

Most of us have a theory, or set of testable ideas as to who we are. Psychologists call this theory we carry around with us "the self". If I am shy or friendly, for example, I will watch for evidence proving to myself that this is true. Being a shy or friendly becomes part of who I see myself to be. Add all other interlocking parts of who I am including feelings of distinctness, continuity and agency, and a self emerges.

Having a self is a useful thing. With a self we can learn and problem solve by seeing ourselves in different situations and planning accordingly. When we watch ourselves either in our imagination or in real life, our brain is fooled into thinking there must be two different beings, the observer and the observed. We may have the feeling that there is someone else inside watching the world thru our eyes. So we say, "I have a body", forgetting that I am my body and that this body has created a self out of pieces of culture. But it feels the other way around, that there is another being inhabiting this body.

The problem with this, one of many of the brain's after-the-fact interpretations, is that such a being, called a homunculus in psychology, would have fixed and eternal characteristics that the we that is our bodies could not control. Hence people who suffer from poor self-concept, depression, anxiety or conduct disorder resign themselves to their condition. They think, "This is just the way I am". When they act in ways different from their usual pattern, it feels phoney, that this is not who they are.

If we realize that there is no little person inside us, that the self is just a theory that allows us to do certain things, then we can exchange that theory for a better one. In a sense, the old self is a habit, like an addiction, and we can choose to break bad habits and replace them with better habits. We are therefore able to create better selves for our selves, selves that we can love.