

Experiencing Reality

Marcelo Manucci
Noël Salviolo



As the Spanish conquerors were arriving on a ship to the shores of Trinidad and Tobago, the sailors saw creatures swimming in the water. They observed, they stared and attempted to decipher what they were looking at. 'Whales? No! Dolphins? No! Mermaids! Yes!', they concluded. When they arrived to land and saw them closer they realized they were mistaken and that these animals were in actual fact West Indian Manatees. How did such a confusion occur, you ask? How did these adult men become convinced that a fictitious mythological creature was before them? This was all possible because the sailors hadn't seen women in months and they were anxious to do so. Thus, their internal wish determined and influenced what and how they saw reality.

The neurobiology of our inner landscape



The previous anecdote might be quite an extreme example of the desolation and the desperation of the sailors that saw what didn't exist, but this example isn't too different from what some people have also experienced when they have seen water in the desert. Why is it possible for us to see what doesn't exist? Why are we capable of believing in visualizations that aren't actually there? Both the mermaids and the mirages are examples that succeed in illustrating up to what extent our inner landscape influences our outlook on life.

Our outlook on life is determined by our inner landscape which is our perception (a picture) that depends on our personal emotional framework. What you see around you depends on your emotions. These emotions influence the design of your daily landscape. Thus, the limits between what occurs 'inside and outside' of our minds are blurry because we address daily events from the perspective of a personal image according to the emotional connection one has to the situation.

Our daily life is a sequence of experiences that we organize through a script that brings meaning to the events. The script, as a "conscious version," is a personal frame of reference that reshapes the past, describes the present and projects the future. In this sense, our experiences are like a "subjective package" of representations that arise from the articulation of cognitive and emotional dimensions ("what we think" and "what we feel"). Therefore, the relationship with reality is the relationship with our explanations of reality. The (positive or negative) sign of the experience does not depend exclusively on the conditions of reality, but it is also dependent on the capabilities of the personal script to contain and interpret the impacts of daily events in our inner landscape.

In the sequence of electrical impulses and chemical reactions that occur in the brain when we create an experience, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio makes a distinction between emotions and feelings. For the scientist, feelings are emotions associated with thoughts. An external or internal stimulus triggers specific chemical discharge, which generates a specific emotion (fear, joy, anger, sadness) depending on the type of molecule involved. However, in the case of people, the thoughts reinterpret the emotions. The chemical reaction of the body always produces the same emotions, but emotions do not always generate the same feelings because the generation of feelings is related to the thoughts associated with this chemical reaction. In this sense, feelings setup a set of simultaneous processes: the stimulus that generates reactions in the brain, the response in the body and the ideas that accompany this reaction. Our explanations of reality can change the chemical components. Similarly, spontaneous chemical reactions of emotions can change interpretations (meanings) of the events around us. Thoughts can change brain chemistry, as well as a physical event in the brain (chemical components), can change an idea.

Labyrinths or quicksand?

Sit still. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Open your mind: Imagine a path, it's quite possibly dark, there are walls on the side. You aren't sure where you are or what the way out is. You are in a labyrinth. But, you know that if you keep on going, if you don't give up and persist, eventually you will find a way, because there is a way out. Whatever you do, there is no doubt that you will make it.

Now, open your eyes. Re-adjust your position. Take another deep breath and imagine a sky. You are looking up, because you can't look down. You are surrounded by a strange substance that is dry and wet at the same time. You are in quicksand. You want to get out but the more you move doesn't guarantee you will be freed. This time, there is no assurance of a way out. Whether or not you make it is 100% up to you and your decisions.

These two scenarios represent two opposite perspectives/outlooks on reality. How we manage and deal with the experiences we are faced with, depends on the number of alternatives we are open to when observing our reality and will determine our emotional exchange through them. The amount of 'possible scenarios' we are open to defines our alternatives on how we handle and deal with the experiences in our daily lives. So, what are the different ways we can face and deal with our experiences?

The classical figure of a person who confronted their personal uncertainty was that of a warrior in a labyrinth who, after overcoming the challenges he/she faces, reached a personal transformation (epiphany) that then led to a time of change amongst his/her people. The Greek myth of the Minotaur has remained a foreign and romantic reference. Nowadays, we find ourselves in an absolutely unstable territory which has modified the previous 'rules of the game' and has redefined our landscape of intervention. We no longer face labyrinths, but rather quicksand, and this difference is based on the structure of the obstacles and challenges we are now confronted with. A labyrinth has a static structure that exists objectively, beyond our personal movements, and where time doesn't generate a difference in its conditions. Therefore, in a labyrinth, our actions don't change the structure of the obstacles, since the way out is always at the end of the tunnel. Instead, in our current context, each and every one of our actions are protagonists in the definition of the obstacles and challenges we face. There is no predetermined exit. The way out depends on our personal movements and decisions.

In our daily lives, we have been educated to face labyrinths and not quicksand. For this reason, when confronted with unknown situations or difficult moments, we always end up looking for the way out instead of creating new possibilities to change our movements. The desperation to find an exit leads us to believe in what doesn't exist (mermaids and quicksand).



Consciously screenwriting our experiences

We are screenwriters of events. We explain the phenomena of reality to contain the emotional impact it generates in our daily life. In this script, we distribute the characters, put words to our emotions, explain the uncertainty we feel and describe the consequences of the event in our life. We are the writers of a script based on which we make decisions because we believe in it. The script is the “conscious version” of our interior landscape that arises from those elements that we can manipulate of our map. The script is the story that justifies our representation of reality and places us in the dynamics of these events. Have you ever stopped to think what script you’re writing about the events around you?

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In doing so, and in connection to the previous discussion regarding mermaids and mirages, a strategy to avoid justifying unreal interpretations is to relativize our scripts. This would entail being consciously aware of our internal process of screenwriting, as well as questioning the different scenarios we observe around us. In doing so we would avoid falling automatically into imaginary assimilations, and instead it would allow us to have a critical and conscious understanding of the process we go through in reaching our conclusions, and thus a more self aware and responsible analysis of our circumstances.

Sit still. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Open your mind. Whether you see mermaids or manatees, or whether you are in a labyrinth or in quicksand is up to you.

