

# Your Real Imaginary Friend

*What Is Consensual Perception and How Can You Escape It?*

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I

Let's start with three concepts. Consensus. Perception. Language.

- 1) Consensus: a general agreement about something : an idea or opinion that is shared by all the people in a group.
- 2) Perception: awareness of the elements of the environment through physical sensation. (This was the *third* definition I found online: the first one, interestingly enough, was: "the way you think about or understand someone or something." Keep this in mind, I will refer back to it.)
- 3) Language: the system of words or signs that people use to express thoughts and feelings to each other.

The general agreement is that both language and consensus are shaped by perception, i.e., *what we perceive dictates the terms of communication and what we can agree about.*

I am on the autism spectrum, making me a perceptual anomaly who rarely agrees with other people about what's perceptibly real. I cannot agree with the above. From my point of view, it's the exact opposite: *language and consensus determine what we (allow ourselves to) perceive.* (I should probably extend the idea of "language," however, to include the entire spectrum of *learned values and meanings.*)

So right out the gate I'm faced with a seeming infinite regress of problems: How to use language to demonstrate that language prevents us from *grokking* certain concepts, including the concept that language prevents us from *grokking* . . . ; and so on, ad infinitum.

My first attempt at this piece was for a fairly mainstream writer's website. It was laid out in what I *thought* were clear descriptive terms, but I was told by the writer that "Most readers aren't able to deal with numerous abstract concepts, they need concrete images." This led to a small epiphany. Being on the autistic spectrum, I just didn't *get* how many of the concepts I was describing might be "abstract" to other people, because for me, they are quite concrete (i.e., experientially real).

I realized that you can't show a fish what water is. You have to lead him onto the land so he can see what it's *not*. (How's that for a concrete image?)

Talking about things that people are unable to perceive because they don't have the language—or the consensus—to think about them is like throwing a sheet over an invisible man. You can't help them see it; you can only make them aware that something is there. (Concrete image number 2.)

## II



Imagine a child who encounters some form of *sentience* that its parents can't perceive. What do the parents do? They call it an "imaginary friend." They don't want to entertain the possibility that some weird phenomena is interacting with their child (scary), much less that their child is diagnosably schizophrenic (scarier). They have *consensually agreed* on the *language construct* "imaginary friend," based not on any perception (you *can't* perceive it, because it's imaginary!), but only on a thinking process. But if you did a survey of parents asking them what "imaginary friend" actually means, you would receive many different answers. The child, for its part, may take on the meaning of "imaginary

friend” before it fully understands it. It literally can’t think outside the parameters of the language being given to it, because “thought,” from a neurotypical-adult perspective, is *contingent on language*.

This is what is sometimes known, in colloquial English, as “a cluster fuck.” This is also probably why perception is defined, by Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, as primarily a matter of *the way we think*.

I found the afore-mentioned writer’s admonition to me that “most readers need concrete images” somewhat ironic, because I had already described, in the first draft of this piece, how some autistics “think in pictures.” Maybe other autistics think in colors, numbers (Daniel Tammet), or musical notes. Myself, I think in words, but my thought tends to veer into what neurotypicals may see as *highly abstract constructions*—what I like to call “arguments for the impossible.”

It’s likely that, the further from language-based thought an autistic person veers, the less likely they will be able to verbalize their experience. Many autistics don’t speak, and of those who have learned spoken language, many appear to have done so without internalizing it (taking the language implant, or “word virus,” as William Burroughs called it) to the same degree.<sup>1</sup>

To give a concrete example, Stephen Wiltshire is an autistic painter with the ability to recreate complex cityscapes from memory after only a single sighting. Presumably, Wiltshire isn’t thinking in language—or perceiving-as-thinking. His perceptions appear to have gone *straight into the body*, unmediated by language, and to come back up into consciousness the same way—as if he was pulling up a file from a hard drive.

This is not how the neurotypical brain functions, and the perceptual social consensus we exist in is generally not conducive to such alternate forms of perception. If autism entails a more liberated or “extra-consensual” perception, one result is a reduced ability to function *within* the consensus—the inability to communicate verbally being an obvious example. As an autistic author, I may be able to boldly go where no mind has gone before; but when it comes to communicating my experience in a way that “most readers can deal with” it—that’s a whole other kettle of fish.

To lead the fish away from water (mixing my metaphors now!) means jumping in at the deep end of consensus. Since I am an air-breathing autistic, the chances I will drown before I can get anyone to “read my signals” are distressingly high. I only hope this image sufficiently illustrates the urgency of my argument.

Consensual perception not only prevents alternate forms of perception. It literally imprisons—and kills—many extra-consensual perceivers. When I write, I am in a sense writing for my life.

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<sup>1</sup> According to research reported by Joseph Chilton Pearce in *Magical Child*, spoken language installs itself in a child’s body as it is learned. Pearce cites studies showing how “so-called random movements immediately coordinated with speech when speech was used around the infants.” These and subsequent studies further revealed that “each infant had a complete and individual repertoire of body movements that synchronized with speech: that is, that each had a specific muscular response to each and every part of his culture’s speech pattern.” By adulthood, Pearce added, “the movements have become microkinetic, discernible only by instrumentation, but nevertheless clearly detectable and invariant. The only exception found was in autistic children, who exhibited no such body-speech patterning.” This suggests an internalization of something external, and may be direct evidence of how language installs itself into human consciousness as thought—internal dialogue.

Consensual perception depends on the agreement, not only about what is perceptibly real, but also to ignore, refute, or dismiss anything that challenges that agreement. When parents tell a child that the invisible agency it is mysteriously interacting with is “imaginary,” they dismiss the possibility of an aspect of reality interacting with their child that they are unable to perceive. It’s necessary for the child to go along with this interpretation, eventually, in order not to come into (what may feel like) potentially life-threatening conflict with its parents.

This process is known as socialization—or simply “growing up.” It’s what I suspect many of us feel we *never quite managed to get right*.

What if the child's playmate was *not* imaginary but belonged to another perceptual frame of reference? Then perception has been *reduced*, via language, in order to fit into the consensual perceptual framework. It is a kind of imaginary murder.

Have you ever considered how the only time we ask “Did you see/hear that?” is when we doubt the reliability of our senses? We don’t generally crosscheck our experience of reality with others until some anomaly arises, because we just assume we all perceive the same things. It’s only when we question the agreement that we start to discover we don’t.

You are not reading the same piece that I am writing. It's impossible for you to do that, ever, short of direct brain to brain transference. The reason it's impossible is that your own internal framework *alters the text via the act of reading it*. All we can agree on here is that no agreement is possible.

It's a lonely truism that all we can ever know with absolute certainty are our own perceptions (this, and the fact that we *are* perceiving). If you've ever argued with a lover or friend over the color of an item of

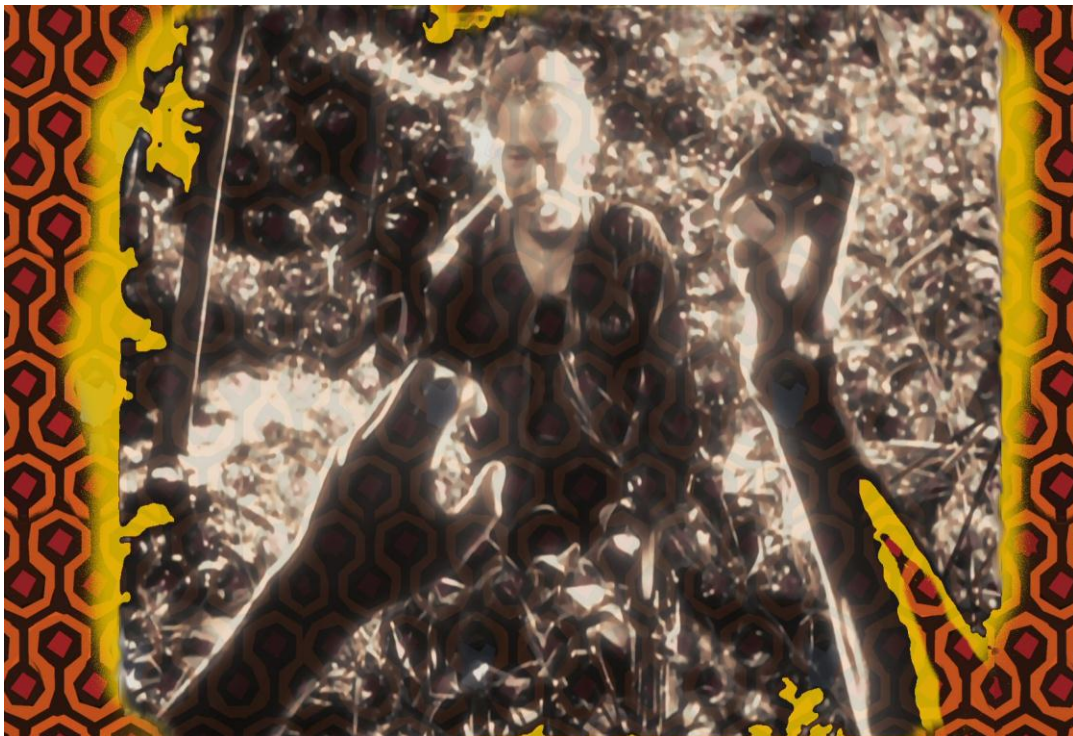


clothing—or anything else where the subjectivity of perception comes horribly to the fore—you know how frustrating, even despair-inducing, failing to find confirmation about the reality of your perceptions can be.

Suppose you *could* see the sky through my eyes and what it looked like to you was what you have always called green? Words would have fooled us into thinking there was a consensus when, really, no such thing is possible. Words impose the *idea* of agreement by concealing the reality that we can only perceive our own perceptions.

The agreement of consensus is closer to an agreement to ignore this inescapable fact—the impossibility of consensus—and act as if we *can* agree. Social functioning depends on this agreement, just as the movie business does. It's called "suspension of disbelief."<sup>2</sup>

#### IV



A dozen eyewitnesses to the same event supply different details, at times radically conflicting. The police officer on the case shakes his head in frustration and curses them all. But what if all of those witnesses are faithfully reporting their perceptions?

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<sup>2</sup> As a general rule, we will do anything to avoid the feeling of being alone in our perceptions. In fact, our survival once depended on agreement: which plants were edible, which wildlife to be avoided, and so on. In our individual experience, we learned to agree with our parents' version of reality in order to be able to communicate our needs properly and have them be met. Once again, the question of what is "perceptually incorrect" is more than just a philosophical one. It's a socio-political reality that affects not just our chances for success, but our chances for survival.

In Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, the same story is told from several different points of view; while the main elements remain consistent, the overall meaning is drastically different each time—as different as hero and villain. In the 2012 documentary *Room 237*, several different people's interpretations of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* are juxtaposed, each completely different from the others. If the descriptions focused exclusively on the most *subjective* aspects of the viewing experience, we might even think we were hearing about different movies. Does this mean there's a version of *The Shining* for every person who sees it? Or does it mean there's no separate artifact-movie at all, only the interface of consciousness with something ultimately unknowable?

For human beings, narrative is like water for fish—we flounder and die without it. It's how we make the unknowable seem knowable, and finally known. If we speak/hear the same narrative for long enough, it becomes all we *can* know. Yet the opportunity for escape from the prison of consensual perception is always there. It's in the fact that, whenever we reform the narrative to incorporate a newly discovered anomaly—some dissonant element—we have the opportunity to see how we are *always* creating narratives out of data and how there *is* no narrative outside of what we create. *We* are the narrators of every story. And there are no separate categories for fiction and non-fiction.

Consensual perception is a self-reinforcing model of reality: what can't be perceived does not exist, and what we agree doesn't exist, can't be perceived.

One current example of this is the common, kneejerk use of the term “conspiracy theory.” The term is applied to any kind of perception—including *firsthand experience*—that threatens to uncomfortably extend the parameters of what is “known”—i.e., agreed to be real. Recently, for example, the British Prime Minister called self-identified victims of systematized child sexual abuse “conspiracy theorists.” Yet, as the post-Jimmy-Savile explosion of high-level pedophilia and corruption continues to show on a daily basis—and despite high-level non-denial denials—yesterday's conspiracy theory is tomorrow's evening news.

Blind resistance to changing the narrative is natural enough. Introducing an incongruent element into the narrative (as in the fictional genre of transrealism) transforms the narrative because the new element changes all the other elements by *creating a new context*. At this point, the unthinkable becomes unavoidable.

The alternative to this is to slightly adjust the narrative (e.g., talk about “conspiracy theories”) to deal with the incongruities, adapting to accommodate them rather than throwing out the narrative. This latter is by definition impossible because of our dependence on narrative to function. In a similar way, recognizing that the institutions we depend on to survive are corrupt to the core is likewise impossible—as impossible as for a child to see an abusive caregiver as “bad”—because, without that support, we are quite helpless. Instead, we talk about conspiracy theories, or, if we know too much to pretend, about social reform. We get busy discussing ways of saving the barrel from all those putrid apples.

This entails forgetting everything we know about apples, barrels, and putrefaction—in other words, another, more advanced form of denial.



Moving away from such uncomfortably concrete imagery, let's get back to the safe ground (or waters) of the abstract.

It is via the inception of learned language (socialization) that we cease to perceive directly through the senses and begin to experience *indirectly*, via the interpretation system (the narrative) of "mind." Life becomes a movie in which we don't even have a walk-in part, because we are now a paying audience member.

Yet perception predates consensus (and society), and perception will continue long after the consensus has been transformed or broken down completely. This is because narratives aren't built out of perceptions but out of words ~ perceptions being both *nonlinear and multi-directional*.

Pause a second and observe how much you are perceiving through your body *in this moment*. Try and make a narrative out of it. You can't, because pure perception doesn't lend itself to narratives. Only a *thought-based interpretation of our perceptions* does.

The idea that we can trust our perceptions stems from the suspension of disbelief in the narrative. It's on this that the existence of a functioning *social identity* depends. This is the real imaginary friend, the so-called mind, or ego-self.

The mind is a word-based construct. At a preconscious (or at least preverbal) level, we've agreed that it has the ability to correctly interpret perceptual data and hence to experience objective reality—as opposed to, you know, delusional, *imaginary*, wholly subjective “reality” (kids' stuff!). But does it?

This belief both stems from and is constantly reinforced by our allegiance to the collective agreement that says, in order to get along, we better at least *pretend* to agree on “what's what” and what's not. This is known as “group think.” At a more primal level, it's all about safety in numbers.

We reason among ourselves that the dominant narrative must be the correct one, for otherwise it would not be dominant. If we have to ignore evidence that shows otherwise, we will ignore it. If we support one another in our delusions, they become “common sense.” That sheet running across the living room floor doesn't prove there's an invisible agency beneath it. Not at all. It's probably just one of the kids having fun. There are no kids? Well then, one of the animals! Uncomfortable anomalies are easy to ignore. We avoid discomfort instinctively, without even having to think about it. It takes a conscious decision to question the narrative, but none at all to accept it. So we stop thinking about anything that threatens the narrative without ever having to make any decision to do so. It “just happens.”

We agree to suspend disbelief and then we agree to forget ever having done so.

## VI

A manufactured consensus depends on manufactured consent.

The way to escape consensual perception is simple. It's also seemingly impossible within the terms of consensual perception. But here it is: Cease giving consent.

The interpretation system/perceptual filter which we think of as ourselves—our thought-based, constructed identity-self—is illusory. Far from being our *amigo*, this original imaginary friend is more like a once-needed ally turned adversary. It has become our prison guard.

The option of relinquishing this illusion and returning to the natural state of *pure perception* is always open. All it requires is everything: a shifting of focus away from the elements of perception (the outside world and the values that tell us what's perceptually correct), and a focusing inward—on *the act of perceiving itself*.

Simply put—and here's where quantum physics comes crashing into the realm of psychology and everything else—either we recognize that our interpreting mind-self is a completely unreliable narrator of a fictional narrative; or, we admit that everything we think we know is wrong. Either way, we are up invisible creek without an imaginary paddle.

Pure bodily perception means knowing the blueness of the sky for what it is. Maybe it's something objectively real, something we can *all* agree on, or maybe it isn't. But either way we won't get to talk about it. We won't even get to think about it.

All we will get is to be lost in the blue.



