

THE
PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN

NORMAL VARIATIONS IN THE SENSE OF REALITY.

BY JUNE E. DOWNEY,

University of Wyoming.

Observations on the loss of the sense of reality have usually been restricted to pathological cases. From the results obtained by questioning healthy people; from references found in works of fiction and autobiography; above all, from my own experience, I am convinced that fluctuations in the sense of reality are, within certain limits, common and that a report on such normal variations might be of value. To this end I have watched somewhat closely my own experiences, with results which no doubt other observers could parallel somewhat in detail; although as individuals we find the predicates real and unreal attaching themselves to certain phases of experience with apparent arbitrariness — to what confusion of the philosopher!

To begin with, how, from the introspective standpoint, shall the feeling of reality be defined? It is, as it were, psychical solidity; not merely vividness of experience but, rather, density of experience, whether that experience be perceptual, ratiocinative, or emotional. With the loss of the sense of reality, tangibility and meaning evaporate from experience.

In my own experience the feeling of reality rises and falls. In certain cases it is easy to refer the fluctuations to physical conditions. Lack of sleep reduces the feeling of reality; so too, in an even greater degree, does muscular fatigue of the eyes. Acute pain, on the other hand, raises the sense of reality, so much so that at times it is welcomed as a relief. Sleeplessness and eye-fatigue, to repeat, occasion a loss of the sense of reality; so too does emotional, but not mental or physical fatigue. At such times the external world seems to lack solidity; it awakens no interest; people appear as trees walking; thought moves sluggishly; indifference to the consequences of actions

ensues; consciousness of self ebbs. Loss of the sense of position I have never experienced except when rousing suddenly from sleep.

Certain sense stimulations produce a similar state, sometimes with abrupt suddenness, a state which vanishes as suddenly. The sound of a fly buzzing, the crowing of a rooster, the sound of hammering not only seem to lack solidity themselves but even swamp contemporaneous experiences in like unreality. The singing of a bird, on the other hand, heightens the sense of reality. The haze of an autumn day that makes objects seem far-off, immense, veiled, has the same effect upon mental experiences. Thoughts come slowly; emotions seem big, but not intense. The roar of a big city, the presence of a crowd of people reduces the sense of reality. The self seems to shrink and to lose interest. Solitude and grand or beautiful natural scenery raise the sense of reality to a high pitch.

Not only do sense stimulations bring on a feeling of unreality that extends from the sense world to the world of thought and emotion, but the reverse may happen. Prolonged reading or thinking on philosophical topics has the same results. Not only do conclusions seem to lack validity, but the world of daily experience also grows thin, dream-like. This state, which is rather unpleasant, seems more akin to emotional than to mental fatigue. Again, the reading of certain sorts of poetry, Yeats' for instance, or of such plays as Maeterlinck's reduces the sense of reality. Exertion seems unprofitable; the world, a shadow-world; people, charming but not vital fictions. This state is languorously pleasant.

Reactions from intense emotional excitement occasion a loss of the feeling of reality. A dreaded ordeal, if long anticipated, brings on such a reaction. The feeling of indifference to results that ensues is in my own case distinctly valuable, since it does away with self-consciousness and fear of consequences.

The predicate of unreality has attached itself to certain things in a seemingly arbitrary and uncomfortable way. A voice over a telephone has no body, messages so received make no impression upon me. Again, letters written by myself seem unmeaning and futile. That a letter will reach its destination and convey my message is matter of reasoned conviction; but no feeling of reality attaches to a correspondence. Social invitations fail to convince, particularly if given orally. I always experience a feeling of surprised relief when I find that I didn't 'dream it.'

The sense of reality in dreams is for me not intense, as a usual thing. A dream has, however, given me the most poignant feeling of

reality I have ever experienced. This dream affected my waking mood for days afterward.

Related to the experiences described above as loss of the sense of reality and yet unlike them in certain respects is an experience that comes at long intervals. The underlying support of the universe, as it were, drops away; in religious terms, God ceases to exist for me. This state is not brought about by speculation; philosophical conclusions have nothing to do with it. At such times the objects of the external world seem unusually well-defined and brightly-illuminated; my thoughts, unusually clear and coherent. The state was last experienced on a hot Sunday afternoon when the wind was roaring in a most lively fashion. I fell into a deep sleep in which I seemed to be tossed on the wind as on ocean billows. When I awoke the sense of some great loss, of an unsupported universe, was upon me. The sharpening of objects and the acuteness of thought were noticeable.

Unfortunately, I can cite no experiments on sense or organic reactions made at the time when the mood of unreality is present. I am aware, however, that at such times sensory and motor automatisms manifest themselves. I sometimes, for instance, write verses half-mechanically or, even, philosophical squibs which represent no conscious process of reasoning.

That the sense of reality leaves those acts that one comes to perform more or less reflexly is a common experience. In teaching one often hears one's self talking without realizing what one is saying. One may stare a word out of countenance. It is also a common experience that reality fails to attach itself immediately to experiences so out of harmony with formed habits that consciousness cannot assimilate them. A great and sudden sorrow is not realized, as we say; neither is a sudden great joy. One would also be inclined to think that a life that obeys the promptings of instinct would take on a tinge of reality that with difficulty suffuses a life that violates the most deep-seated racial instincts.

In explanation of the feeling of unreality, the theory that we have to do merely with disorders of organic sensation does not seem wholly satisfactory, although it would seem that such disorders can induce such a state. The states are often so fleeting; or, again, the feeling attaches itself to certain objects in such a way that one doubts the possibility of an explanation solely on the ground of organic disturbance. Is it not possible that we have here to do with cases of diffused or distracted attention, which may be very variously conditioned?