Implications of the Differences Between Our Perceptual and Conceptual Views

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The aim of this theoretical article is to characterize the viewpoint of the “experiencing self,” as described in dual information processing theory, and apply it to a wide variety of diverse and important psychological and philosophical conundrums including stress and anxiety, identity, free will, duality, and the origins of insight. It first describes “two selves theory.” In it the rational-cognitive system relies on concepts, memory, and symbols as its raw materials. The experiential system relies on percepts, images, and present-moment experience. Because the experiential system intelligently processes percepts, and humans can only consciously understand concepts, its functioning has been hidden from our grasp. Using its defining characteristics, this paper will attempt to recreate and understand its view. Epstein’s “experiencing self” fits the characteristics of a self that only processes percepts. The reality it perceives meets criteria for a psychological unconscious. A fundamental cause of anxiety may originate from the stressful differences between what’s perceived and what’s conceived. The experiential information processing system may be inherently monist because perceptual reality has not yet been differentiated by language (conceptualized). Any considerations of stress must include comparison between perceptual and conceptual views; resolution of important psychological and philosophical conundrums may also be resolved using this approach. Psychological treatments and educational efforts aimed at uncovering, understanding, and accounting for the existence of both views may have beneficial effect on individuals and society.

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When it was introduced, dual information processing theory (Epstein, 1973) offered a remarkable alternative to the view that intelligent reasoning arose solely from the domain of rational-cognitive processing. The new theory upset the old order by suggesting that sensory-perceptual experience could be processed directly. In this new system, memory, language, numbers, cause-and-effect relations, and logical analysis were no longer requirements for adaptive functioning. What it empowered were holistic images, associative connections, and, in particular, the sense-perceptions of the present moment (Epstein, 1973, 1994, 2014).

Examples of the responsiveness of the experiential system have been well documented within the behavioral economics research literature, including many that formed the basis of the 2002 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics (Kahneman, 2003). One research example reveals the strength of present-moment experience over that of evaluative memory, a foundation of rational-cognitive processing. Investigating human decision-making, the researchers had participants immerse their hands in cold water (Kahneman, Fredrickson, Schreiber, & Redelmeier, 1993). Two different water temperature conditions were used. A group of participants immersed their hands in water at 14 °C for 60 s. Then the experiment was repeated exactly the same way except for two differences: The immersion was extended another 30 s, for a total of 90 s, and during those final 30 s, the water temperature was raised by 1 °C.

When the subjects had completed both the short and long hand-immersion conditions, they were asked to choose which version they would prefer to do again. A significant majority chose
to repeat the longer trial and thus, oddly, to experience pain for a longer period. The authors concluded that although the pain was more prolonged in the longer trial, subjects counterintuitively opted for it because of their present-moment impression that the pain was less during the final 30 s. Apart from making this choice based on the experience of less pain, they also may have undergone a shift in their definition of pain, enabling a de-emphasis of the concept of pain that may be related to their attentiveness to sensory experience.

Numerous instances exist in which people make decisions based more on their sensory-perceptual experience than their rational-cognitive processes (Gilovich, Griffin, & Kahneman, 2002). Most of the items on the long list of such “cognitive biases” appear because they cause behaviors that seemingly run counter to rationality. Though many examples exist, a few include: duration neglect, the neglect of the duration of an event in determining its value (Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996); hyperbolic discounting (Laibson, 1997), in which people inconsistently over time have a stronger preference for more immediate payoffs; and negativity bias, in which people have a greater recall of unpleasant memories (Haizlip, May, Schorling, Williams, & Plews-Ogan, 2012).

Not only do we make decisions using experiential processing but we also “know without thinking” (Epstein, 2014; Gladwell, 2005; Kahneman, 2012; Wilson, 2002). For lay audiences, they synthesized years of research findings and provided compelling anecdotes about our unexpected abilities. This “knowing” does not utilize the purposeful use of thoughts in the mind that typically defines the rational cognitive process of conscious thinking. Anecdotal accounts of art appraisers who appear to understand when an art forgery is placed before them, even before examining it in detail (Gladwell, 2005, pp. 3–8), and of skilled psychotherapists quickly knowing which new clients will soon divorce (Gladwell, 2005, pp. 46–47) have been brought forth to highlight the mysterious workings of our minds. Presumably, the experiential information processing system is the driving force behind the decisions we make when we use this kind of implicit processing.

In an example of complex knowing without thinking, researchers had human participants press one of four electronic buttons (Lewicki, Hill, & Bizot, 1988). In doing so, they were to predict in which quadrant of a computer screen the letter “X” would next appear. The results showed that their performance steadily improved as they nonconsciously absorbed the complex, computerized rules underlying where the “X” would appear. Although the human ability to understand and even quickly learn things beyond conscious awareness has been well described as the “adaptive unconscious” (Wilson, 2002), System I (Kahneman, 2012), and the experiential processing system (Epstein, 1994, 2014), the influence of these two systems on human behavior has yet to be fully elaborated. The scope of this present article is to explore the differences in what these two systems process and how the separate results of each may influence human behavior. The three main propositions put forth will argue that: (a) The experiential system processes percepts, not concepts, and so its operations remain unconscious and always hidden from our conceptual understanding; (b) A fundamental form of anxiety and stress may occur when differences in the results produced by these two systems exist; and (c) Understanding the differences between the views resulting from these two systems may also be used as a tool to help resolve some significant philosophical and psychological conundrums, like those related to dualism, free-will, time dilation, intuition, identity, and so forth.

Dual Information Processing Theory

Characteristics of the Processing

As early as 1973, the psychologist Seymour Epstein described the nature of the experiential system. It works very quickly, in contrast to how we labor over doing even simple multiplication tasks in our heads. But it deals only in the present moment, unable to draw on memory. It uses images, not language or symbols. It makes associations, but not cause-and-effect connections. It takes a holistic view, not one of distinctions or analysis (Epstein, 1994, p. 711). These characteristics are in sharp contrast to those of the rational-cognitive system, which relies on concepts like language, logic, symbols, and numbers. What’s vital to understand about the experiential system is that because it does not use concepts, it is by definition inconceivable. It has
been unknown to us, and will always be, because our rational-cognitive understanding only occurs within the mental world circumscribed by concepts. As a rule-of-thumb, Pashko (2014) has suggested the rational-cognitive system processes concepts whereas the experiential system processes percepts.

Percepts Versus Concepts

One of the most unusual aspects of our lives may be that no one can characterize any of our sensory-perceptual experiences. This applies to every contact anyone has ever had with the world; and, notably, it is only through our sensory-perceptual experiences that we directly encounter the world. Floral, sweet, dusty, stifling, delicious, and every other adjective one might think of are merely partial conceptual representations, correlated adjectives, mere words. They do not describe the totality of the actual subjective sensory-perceptual experience of, say, the scent of a rose, which actually is beyond our power to capture in words. Similarly, it is impossible to answer this question: “What is your subjective experience of the color blue?” Not what blue is similar to, but rather your experience of blueness itself. It cannot be done because it is literally impossible to express any of our perceptual experiences in conceptual terms.

It may be easy to concede that “blueness” is inexpressible because it relates to a single sense, vision, and the physical characteristics of the color blue may seem less material. That same inexpressibility, however, also applies to an apparently more robust, more material thing, like a cup, which is perceived through two senses, the visual and the tactile. It also applies to our interactions with others and with nature.

Some may believe that describing a cup is hardly impossible since a cup is surely a “cup,” but confusion may arise because of a mistaken understanding. Without thinking but universally, people substitute an operational definition (i.e., the concept of a cup at some distance away) for the immediate sensory-perceptual experience of what reaches the eye and touches the hand, the cupness (i.e., the totality of percepts) of the visual shape, the warming feel, and the pressure on the fingers that comprise the percepts utilized by the experiential system. The rules of language and communication require a substitution. But blame can be placed on those who forget the transformation has occurred and willingly, though mistakenly, accept and psychologically exchange the concept for the percept. Until we fully appreciate the downside, such a replacement may seem to be an acceptable, cost-effective trade-off. When we know better, the cost may appear to be significantly higher than we have appreciated.

Consider for a minute the extent to which we, our authentic, creative, and vibrant selves, have been degraded or diminished by ageism, genderism, racism, and so forth, through having been inappropriately conceptualized. Consider also the extent to which a few people who have mistakenly taken on a conceptualized, power-oriented self-identity have caused havoc for millions.

Yet, before concluding there are clear demarcations between concept and percept, it must be recognized that a complete dichotomy may not exist since conceptual processing has its origin in perception (Goldstone & Barsalou, 1998). They argue that “Parallels between perceptual and conceptual processes suggest that many mechanisms typically associated abstract thought are also present in perception, and that perceptual processes provide useful mechanisms that may be co-opted by abstract thought.” Continuing to examine the terms, Barsalou, et al. (1993) have described concepts as “psychological representations of categories and its meaning as people’s understanding of words and other linguistic expressions.” They suggest concepts are not equivalent to meaning offering that: (a) Perceptual symbols represent concepts, (b) Concepts are models for types of individuals in world models, and (c) Word meanings use concepts but are not concepts. They further suggest that perceptual representations arise from any aspect of experience arguing they are not perceptual in the traditional sense but are more generally experiential, arising from any aspect of experience—from both perception of the external world as well as introspection of the internal world. The view that sensory-perceptual experience is the ground of perceptual representation is noteworthy since it accords with what Epstein suggests can be processed and reported on by the experiential information processing system.

Along a similar line of considering distinctions between concepts and percepts, Tye (2011, p. 95) describes a helpful way to under-
stand range of processes existing among sensation, perception, conception, and meaning. He explains, “seeing things is not reducible to seeing that things are so-and-so.” One can see something (seeing), but due to the object’s location, one might not see all of it in its entirety (seeing the object in complete detail). He then extrapolates this to the nonequivalence of “knowing things” and “knowing facts or true truths.” Tye (2011, p. 96) suggests that knowing things equates to direct awareness of sense data, like the color of a table, in which things are known to us, quoting Russell, “just as they are” (Russell, 1912, p. 47). In this aspect, things are known by description. Knowing by indirect awareness, knowing facts or truths, is the subsequent point at which inference and meaning become involved.

Whether or not complete separation exists between the terms concept and percept has yet to be fully elucidated. Needing to operationalize the use of these terms to proceed further with this exploration, this article will define perception operationally as more clearly experiential, something that occurs prior to the formation of concepts but after the activation of the sense receptors (like the photoreceptors of the eye). This definition is general enough that it does not infringe upon other definitions, which also seem to reserve conceptualization for the subsequent step involving language and linguistic meaning, yet it is specific enough for the purposes of this report. Importantly, this definition also accords with the view of Barsalou, et al. (1993) with respect to the required linkage between language and concepts. Since percepts cannot have made the passage into linguistic concepts, they can be distinguished from percepts in this way.

**The Inability to “Understand” Percepts**

Using the above definitions, a sleeper may have, for example, a perception—she feels “cold”—and acts appropriately on it: She pulls up the covers. Yet, she does not wake up and transform the percept into a concept, consciously calling to mind the words “I am cold,” before deciding on the proper course of action. It follows, then, that because the perception that prompts the cover to be pulled up is not transformed into the concept “cold,” the sleeper is not “cold,” per se. The concept of “cold” may occur later if and when the perceptual experience becomes transformed into a concept—the next morning, the sleeper remembers she froze—but this need not ever happen.

Many readers may still argue with the points above, erroneously believing that they wake up because they are “cold,” and their subjective perception of a cup is actually a “cup.” A fascinating example of the difference between a percept and a concept may help make the point as well as offer a hint to an origin of anxiety. Jastrow (1899) developed the odd picture (see Figure 1), which he called a “duck-rabbit.” The picture is not a duck and, further, it is also not a rabbit. Yet one can see it either as representing a duck or as representing a rabbit. In fact, one can toggle one’s view back and forth and see either a duck or a rabbit. Interestingly, the rabbit and the duck cannot be seen simultaneously—though both concepts are simultaneously available—which is an apparent limitation of conceptualization. No one can say the drawing is only a duck or only a rabbit. It can represent either.

Jastrow’s duck-rabbit confirms our ability to “juggle” concepts, moving from one to the other and back again. One can use a similar mental transitioning process to toggle between a percept and a concept. What is the percept here? It is the totality of what we literally see, all the shaded areas within the drawing, from the whitest of the Whites through to the blackest of the Blacks. When one sees the all that is there—no more than an array of lines on paper—but does not conceptually extract either the duck or the rabbit, that is the percept. Many viewers skip past the percept, the whole, delving too quickly into the conceptual to “make sense” of the lines or give meaning to what is seen. Readers seeing

![Figure 1. Duck-Rabbit.](image-url)
this drawing may have been entirely oblivious to the raw percept if not specifically asked to see it. That shows how quickly and thoroughly percepts are overridden by concepts and our compelling need to construct a meaning. Dual information processing theory suggests merely by appreciating the percept we come to know experientially, perceptually, that the duck and the rabbit exist therein and the step to their conceptualization is not needed for full adaptive functioning.

Suggested here is that because the percept can never be satisfactorily conceptualized into either a duck or a rabbit, the result of this ambiguity and uncertainty is anxiety. With some modest extrapolation to the world we perceive, how much of it perfectly fits into any conceptual box? Consider how the concepts of sexuality/gender and race have difficulty fitting into the reality of things, in Bertrand Russell’s words, “just as they are.” Is a mudskipper, a fish? Is an ostrich a bird? Does he or she love me? Am I doing well at work? How often and how much does any concept fit perceptual existence—and couldn’t such lack of fit yield anxiety?

Note that when viewing the percept of the image above, it is “known” but has no linguistic meaning. Meaningfulness appears to arise only through the transformation of a percept into a linguistic concept. Because it does not make sense to our conceptual system, that essential first step is quickly bypassed to find “meaning” in the image. Moreover, this particular image is confounding because it has two. It must be remembered, however, that just because we can create the concepts “duck” and “rabbit” out of the pattern, that does not mean they are there and does not suggest there is any meaning to them being there. A piece of rope on the sidewalk in front of us does not mean it’s a poisonous snake we should avoid.

Mental Fabrication—The Drive to Conceptualize

There is a cognitive process, an inherent bias in the way we process information called pareidolia, which is defined (Pareidolia, n.d.) as “the imagined perception of a pattern or meaning where it does not actually exist.” In less academic terms, it may be defined as the human propensity to “make stuff up.” In one example reported by BBC News, a grilled cheese sandwich was perceived to hold the image of the Virgin Mary. The image was so appealing that the sandwich sold for $28,000 on an online auction site (BBC News, 2004).

Most accounts of pareidolia involve seeing faces, typically those of prominent religious and political figures, but the most common may just be the “man in the moon.” The phenomenon of pareidolia involves taking a vague and random stimulus (a percept) of any kind, not just an image, and inappropriately endowing it with significance. Psychotherapists also use a related word, confabulation, when describing the fabrication of a plausible story, with no real intent to deceive, when one’s memory has failed. Because both involve constructing meaning where none exists, seemingly to minimize the anxiety stemming from not understanding something, there appears to be a functional relationship between these two phenomena. Identified from the study of split-brain patients, the neuroscientific origin for the cause of constructing meaning in instances in which none exists may have been isolated.

Some patients have brain seizures that continue even after many attempts to control them through medication, so brain surgery involving severing the major route of neuronal connection between the left and right hemispheres, splitting the brain, is their last hope. After the surgery, little or no communication goes on between the two sides of the patient’s brain. These patients are well suited to participate in research studies that examine the different functions of the separate halves of the brain because connections between the two sides of their brains are severed.

In one experiment by Gazzaniga (1989), split-brain patients were shown a series of 40 pictures illustrating a story of a man waking in the morning, eating, going to work, and so forth. Then they were asked to review a group of pictures to determine which ones were newly added and which had been in the original group. Results indicated that the right brain hemisphere could easily distinguish the new ones from the original pictures. The left hemisphere, by contrast, could only identify the added pictures as new if they did not fit within the general line of the story. Interestingly, the left-brain would erroneously accept new pictures as orig-
inals if they did fit within the general story line, a man going about his daily activities.

The findings suggest that the right hemisphere reports what appears before it, just what it has seen and no more. The left hemisphere accepts a conceptual gist of a story and then fills in any gaps by what amounts to fabrications—“making stuff up.” Gazzaniga hypothesizes that the left hemisphere functions to interpret events and experiences while the right hemisphere functions to accept experiences and report on them more realistically—just as they are. It may well be that our brain is hard-wired, relying on the normal operations of the left hemisphere, to continually make up plausible stories in an attempt to make sense out of our circumstances. It appears likely that through this function, we accept the most plausible story we can create from the observations at hand as truthful. Perhaps it is through this mechanism that all of us feel compelled to insert meaning, concepts, into every situation in which we find ourselves—even if meaningfulness is not relevant and does not apply. Note, too, the strength of the conceptual drive overwhelms perceptual experience. Cannot it be that a handshake is only a handshake and not a clue to character, or that a “certain” skin color is just a skin color? We make stuff up.

Overreliance on Concepts to Ease Stress

Alfred Korzybski’s (1933) dictum that “the map is not the territory” supports the argument here that “the concept is not the percept.” Korzybski related that once during a lecture he muttered that he was hungry and stopped to get some biscuits, which he shared with his class (Alfred Korzybski, 1933). While he and his students were eating, he showed them the original biscuit packaging, which displayed a picture of a dog’s head and the words “Dog Cookies.” The students were shocked. Two wanted to vomit and ran out of the lecture hall to the toilet. Korzybski remarked, “I have just demonstrated that people do not just eat food, but also words, moreover, that the taste of the former is often outdone by the taste of the latter.”

His students were pleased with their perceptual experience of the biscuits—what they tasted like—but gagged when the biscuits underwent a mental, conceptual transformation into something abhorrent. It seems clear that the difference between seeing the world directly and perceptually, and seeing it through the filter of concepts has great significance.

Language is so pervasive within our environment that many accept a conceptual view in place of the experience of reality. At some significant cost, this occurs in people with phobias. Somehow they have made an association, a representation, between something bad and something with a slight, but real, potential of harm. The fear of spiders, snakes, and dogs are some of the most common phobias. However, accepting a conceptual view in place of experiential, perceptual reality also may be related to the cause of many social ills, like ageism, genderism, racism, narcissism, stress, and so forth.

Perceptual Processing

All of the distracting thoughts running through the mind may simply be concepts testing themselves for the closeness of their fit to reality. But this may be likened to trying to fit a square peg into a place where no hole exists. For every situation encountered or remembered, there unfortunately appears to be a concept trying hard to make sense of it. Plausibility, not truth may be the requirement, for truth is exceedingly hard to know, and a concept close enough seems to suffice; the existence of pareidolia and confabulation support this point. When we see two people talking, our conceptual processes may surmise that something is being planned to our detriment. Maybe; maybe not. The overly strong handshake during a job interview may suggest you lack the energy to perform well there. Hearing the radio announcer say there’s frost on the way makes one concerned that the battery in the car may fail next time. Thoughts about how you stack up against others, unfinished plans, inadequate preparations, and thousands of other things roll on ceaselessly through one’s mind. We need to be prepared to deal with what the world throws at us, so concepts seem to be our best, and perhaps only, means to cope successfully.

Trusting perceptual processing may prevent the heartache from problems arising from the compelling, and often erroneous, drive to find meaning in the meaningless. Perceptual processing exists when you first felt the inspiring awe from seeing your newborn child, the Grand Canyon, the ocean, or anything else so grand for
that matter. It appears responsible for “awe,” that unadulterated experience with the world in which we live. It is available all of the time, though often covered up by concepts. When covered in this way, we have shifted from the perceptual view to an intellectual, conceptual one. Understood by its details, such as salinity levels, the probability of harmful encounters, concerns about swimming within an hour of eating, and so forth, the magnificence of the ocean drops away. We lose our ability to be in touch with awe, feeling a need to be prepared to use this new information for any upcoming situation we may encounter. Is this protective trade-off worth it?

Accepting the Perceptual View

Releasing ourselves from overreliance on concepts may enhance our flexibility for coping with the complicated situations that occur in our daily lives. Because a mind full of thoughts keeps us awake, we already practice the release of concepts, our thoughts, every night when we put our heads down to go to sleep. Though we may not understand the process, we all have had a great deal of success. No one goes completely sleepless for long.

There are many other ways in which one can shift out of the conceptual world and just as many reasons to do so. Who can putt a golf ball, grasp a situation, or listen to a lover when thoughts are racing through the mind? Remedies exist and they mostly all relate to paying attention just to what’s going on before us, even if nothing in particular seems to be happening. Paying attention, whether through formal mindfulness practices, crochet/knitting, chant, silence, vigorous physical exercise, and so forth, appears to be incompatible with being lost in thought (i.e., fixated on concepts).

Perceptual Identity

The difference between a perceptual view and a conceptual one takes on supreme significance when we examine the concept of self-identity and how we see and interact with the world around us. Wittgenstein’s (1975, p. 15) quote that “One of the most misleading representational techniques in our language is the use of the word ‘I’, particularly when used in representing immediate experience” addresses this point most directly.

Within each of us, our two processing systems, the rational-cognitive (a.k.a., “remembering”) and the experiential (a.k.a., “experiencing”), produce two fundamentally different ways of understanding and acting in the world around us—in short, two selves (Kahneman, 2012). Lamenting his inability to describe the experiencing self in any way using language (Kahneman, 2012, p. 390), he complained, “Odd as it may seem, I am my remembering self, and the experiencing self, who does my living, is like a stranger to me.”

The experiential self is a stranger because by ceaselessly grasping at concepts of ourselves, we are unaccustomed to aligning with and living what more fundamentally is a percept. Numerous forces, from language, culture, psychology itself, media, and many others play a significant role aligning self-identity to conceptual correlates (like that our self-importance is certain to improve when we have money, status, or power). As percepts of consciousness, there are no borders to self-identity. Viewed in this way, the relationships that others wish to make between our self-identity and the goods and services that support it only serve to restrict a fundamental unboundedness.

An example of the fluid, perceptual nature of our self-identity may come from a remarkable experiment done in Stockholm in 2008 at the Karolinska Institute (Petkova & Ehrsson, 2008). The quickness, completeness, and universality of the findings may seem inconceivable, or even unbelievable, but the facts are undeniable. Only a perceptual identity may be capable of such a feat. In this research, participants wore a helmet that had a video display inside (see Figure 2). That display showed the view from cameras mounted on the head of a plastic and rubber mannequin standing next to the participant. The person’s view showed only the torso, arms, and legs of the undressed mannequin. Using a blunt stick, the researcher stroked the person’s torso simultaneously with that of the same area on the mannequin. Through the video screen, the participant saw downward along the torso of the mannequin. He could see the stroking of the mannequin and simultaneously feel stroking on his torso. The effect was that the participant’s visual and touch sense were conflicted.

The participant felt his body stroked and saw the mannequin’s stroked in the same place. After just a few strokes of the blunt stick, partic-
participants said that the mannequin’s body felt like their own. When the experimenter went on to threaten the mannequin with a large knife, skin conductance responses from the participant showed that an emotional and physiological connection had been created between the mannequin and the participant. It appears that in addition to saying so, the person actually felt as if his self-identity shifted.

In my opinion, this shift of self-identity to a mannequin comes about when and because the person relies more on his direct sensory-perceptual experience of what he sees and feels to inform him about the world. Only experiential information processing could lead one to accept the mannequin as the source of one’s self-identity, no matter how unlikely that may seem to the participant’s logical understanding.

It does not seem the shift of location of self-identity is a “mistake” made because of a person’s faulty information processing. It occurs in virtually everyone who undergoes this experiment. It seems to be no more than the result of accepting as truthful what one directly sees and feels and rejecting what one thinks. Under these conflict conditions, which appear to discourage the conceptual self-identity, the shift to a mannequin may be as likely to occur as a shift to any other inanimate or inanimate object.

If right, the usual relationship between self-identity and the physical body may not be an actual one, just a conceptual one. It seems plausible that the percept that our conceptual self-identity refers to may be the entirety of what is experienced in the present moment, minus any and all conceptualizations that may seem to appear. Alternatively, it can be argued that the experience of consciousness as it exists, devoid of concepts (including that of our own particular concept of consciousness itself) may be the perceptual replacement for the concept of identity. Support for this latter view comes from three considerations: Consciousness is perceptual in nature; our subjective experience of it defies being described using language; and it has existed for exactly as long as each of us has had self-awareness.

Though it may be more difficult to relate one’s self-identity to a percept, there are many advantages of doing so. First, the fact that one can associate the term “percept” with self-identity already may offer some helpful structure to the difficult question “Who am I?” Answers from the conceptual view must keep changing depending upon the situation but answers from the perceptual view, though they cannot be spoken, never change. Next, it may support our living more through our perceptions than through our conceptions. If accomplished, our view of others and ourselves would become more flexible and reality-based. Significantly diminished would be low self-esteem, self-hatred, self-stereotyping, excessive need for power and narcissism, as well as the rigidity resulting in the stereotyping of others (e.g., racism, genderism). Only concepts have these qualities, not percepts. This does not mean that concepts are harmful or have no utility. What is being pointed out is that fixated overreliance on concepts may be detrimental to an optimal view of reality and that coming to any new situation with an experiential view may open possibilities that a conceptual stance may have closed off.

Having a percept for an identity, in addition to a conceptual one, also may offer a less stressful and more truthful way of using language to describe things that were previously oddly characterized. For the apparently self-reflexive term “my body,” now there can be a consistent perceptual, not a highly variable conceptual, owner as a referent. And a perceptual referent seems to fit better. For those who have a sense they are not aging, despite seeing their body change, a perceptual self-referent seems to better fit the facts.

In sum, the flow of sensory-perceptual stimuli gets transformed into concepts for a variety of reasons (to handle a constant flow of stimuli,
to communicate with others, and so forth). Yet, perceptions are experiential and can never be expressed linguistically. What can be expressed linguistically resides exclusively as part of the rational-cognitive domain. Transformations (concepts) misrepresent the world because, well, representations are not the things themselves. Korzybski’s (1933) quote about “the map is not the territory” has never been disputed. Representations are significant distortions of “what is”—enough so that some believe we can express perceptions when we cannot (e.g., our experience of blueness), overly generalize from modest observations (e.g., racism) and even mistakenly represent our identity as our body. Perhaps one of the most firmly held conceptualizations, the mistaken belief that our body is our identity, seems to be revealed by the “body swap” paradox. Depending on which frame of reference we use (perceptual/experiential or conceptual/rational-cognitive), reality takes on a significantly different appearance.

These different appearances have significant implications, which are described next.

Results and Implications

The argument that perceptual reality exists and informs human decision-making unconsciously may resolve a number of additional and important psychological and philosophical conundrums related to either the definition or cause of stress. Like two sides of a coin, dependent upon one another for structure and function, percepts and concepts rely on each other. Not to be forgotten, shifting between views can occur quickly, at the speed of thought, and completely. As such, both views can be considered truthful—with one being more fundamental but impenetrable to understanding (i.e., perceptual) and the other being a coarse transformation of the original but with the potential for functional utility (i.e., conceptual). Discussed below will be a few of the more interesting confounds that may be resolved by using this conceptual/perceptual version of dual information processing theory.

Realities—Both Dualist and Monist

One of the most powerful stressors anyone ever encounters relates to whether our understanding of the world around us is correct and truthful. This present analysis of dual information processing theory suggests that the world we know exists in two ways, perceptually and conceptually. In closer contact with the perceptual world, we make decisions and act according to what it presents to us. We do not and cannot cognitively understand this reality through language, however. Conceptual reality knows the world only indirectly, being made the more remote by the transformations of language. The conceptual derives from the perceptual, adding form and meaning to innate functioning. To the long-standing philosophical question of “What is reality?,” perceptual reality appears to be the more fundamental choice because conceptual reality derives from it. That a question about reality continues to exist and defies logical understanding after thousands of years may lend credence to the answer that there may in fact be two answers with one having been long hidden from our rational-cognitive understanding.

This article describes two information processing systems. The question arises of how to best characterize the general view of reality taken by each. The rational-cognitive system (Epstein, 2014, p. 12) relies on concepts, cause-and-effect relationships, memory, language and symbols, and an analytic view of differentiation, so its view has much in common with the philosophy of dualism. In general, dualism argues that, “for some particular domain, there are two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles” (Dualism, 2010). All of these characteristics support the establishment of difference, separation, and division. When something is named, symbolized, or made the object of cause-and-effect relations, all of those activities distinguish it from other things.

By contrast, the experiential information processing system (Epstein, 2014, p. 12) relies on percepts, quickness, imagery, associative connections, and holism. Its view appears to have much in common with the philosophy of monism or non-dualism (i.e., not two). In a monist reality, difference, separation, and division do not play a role; wholeness and unity prevail. In general metaphysical terms, monism relates to the view that “there is only one basic substance or principle as the ground of reality” (Monism, n.d.).

In sum, the rational-cognitive information processing system may have the dualist view of
constructing distinctions and separations between one thing and another, whereas its counterpart, the experiential information processing system, may have the monist or non-dual view of nondistinctiveness, nonseparateness, whole- ness, and oneness. Coming to the understanding that two views of reality simultaneously exist may reduce our confusion about the realities we inhabit as well as one of the subtler causes of stress in our lives.

**Stress, Anxiety, and Well-Being**

Dual information processing systems theory supports the contention that anxiety arises in direct relationship to the difference between how the conceptual view of reality differs from the perceptual view. Because it is not transformed, it can be argued that the perceptual view is the more fundamental. The perceptual system may non-consciously know when any conceptual transformations depart significantly from perceived reality. The disparity between the two may produce anxiety and cause stress. As an example, the anxiety from phobias can be viewed in this way-as originating from the difference between the perceptual reality of “what is” and the concept into what it has been transformed (e.g., all snakes are not very dangerous, but may be believed to be). Less obviously, generalized anxiety may originate from perceptually knowing but not cognitively understanding that one’s conceptual view of reality significantly differs from one’s perceptual reality; for example, from the mistaken belief that successful existence in society is above one’s capabilities or that an audience will demand more than you can offer as a speaker.

If anxiety originates from the difference between one’s perceptual and conceptual views of reality, well-being may emerge from their accord. Such accord can arise in two ways: when the conceptual view closely matches the perceptual view, or when the conceptual view is so weakly trusted that it is as though only the perceptual view exists.

The terms “anxiety” and “well-being,” per se, have no absolute validity and do not exist within the experiential, perceptual world. They are concepts and well-being is a conceptual term that may relate to the satisfaction felt when what is perceived and what is conceived are in harmony. Likewise, the term “happiness” does not equate with well-being or satisfaction; it may merely relate to conceptual circumstances temporarily appearing to be more favorable than perceptual ones. Though well-being may refer to complete accord between the perceptual and the conceptual view, that state is difficult to assess and will continue to be.

Some of the best advancements of assessments of the view from the perceptual system have come through the innovative “revealed preferences” approaches (Kahneman et al., 1993; Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003), as described in earlier examples. Additionally, “experience sampling” approaches (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) that infer the subjective value of well-being through analysis of health care and lifestyle choices that people make based on their sensory-perceptual experience of the present moment are encouraging. This method is in opposition to the decades-long attempt to understand subjective value through questions and answers that have tapped only into memory and conceptual orientation of the rational-cognitive system. Additionally, the existence of our two ways of processing information, two selves, requires determining which of these two should be used in our measurements of psychological status, well-being, or value because the answers from each differ significantly. Interestingly, the rational-cognitive system systematically appears to view its own health and well-being as worse-off than it’s experiential counterpart (Redelmeier & Kahneman, 1996).

**Insight**

Using dual information processing theory, it is proposed here that insights may be answers resulting from nonconscious, experiential processing that have come into conceptual awareness where they become newly understood by the rational-cognitive system. The legendary power of insights—a single insight apparently enabled Einstein to understand all of relativity in that one moment (Ferreira, 2010)—may originate from perceptual processing’s indifference to the tenacious hold of rigid conceptual views that may block a clearer view of reality.

**Time Dilation**

“The Moken (people of SE Asia) have no notion or measure of time, they don’t know
their own age, they have no concept of worry, and no word for want nor goodbye” (Vinton, 2015). Though it rarely occurs to us, time actually has two components. Perceptual time consists only of the present moment, the now. Its hallmark is immediacy, so the present moment has no duration, and therefore it cannot play a part in the phenomenon of time dilation. Time’s other component is conceptual, however, so the concepts of duration, future, and past all do apply. Perhaps we experience “time dilation”—a period in which time seems to slow down—when the dominant present-moment-oriented experiential self shifts to the memory-oriented rational-cognitive self. Using dual information processing theory, a strong argument can be made that time dilation occurs when the rational-cognitive processing system becomes dominant, and one’s sense of an acceptable time duration, like waiting for a car to be repaired, has been exceeded. The more firmly held the criterion of an acceptable time for the completion of the car repair, the longer the delay may seem. Forbearance and patience may somehow be related to one’s ability to remain in perceptual time despite feeling the duress imposed by conceptual time.

Shifting Predominance to the Experiential

The shift of identity toward the perceptual, experiential view and away from the conceptual, rational-cognitive view may have implications for a wide variety of interesting psychological and philosophical conundrums beyond the phenomenon of time dilation. Some noteworthy examples are addressed below.

Placebo Response

It has been suggested (Pashko, 2014) that the cause of both the placebo effect, and its allied phenomenon termed “response shift,” may be the shifting from the conceptual view or self to the experiential view or self. In the experiential state, the person can only rate the immediate experience of, say, pain. However, in the conceptual state the person must rate the experience of pain plus all concepts that may link to the painful experience, like the theoretical possibility of being left with a serious disability. Shifting from the conceptual view to the perceptual view should lessen the cognitive burden of pain and provide some relief of pain—and do so without an apparent cause.

Heroism—Acts, Living and Death

A shift of identity to the experiential, perceptual view may help explain heroic acts, those stressful, self-sacrificing actions that place the body in grave danger. When one’s self-identification shifts toward nonconceptualized “consciousness” and away from a self-identity aligned to the concept of bodily self-identity, preserving the physical body should become less important. In such a situation, the danger at hand would not threaten any aspect of the concept of “self-identity.” So the fear of losing the concept of body ownership would be reduced, increasing the chances for heroism. Although heroism and courage take many forms, lack of protection of the physical body remains their hallmark. Courage even to tell the truth when faced with the loss of a lover, a job, friends, and so forth may also originate from the psychological shift of identity away from the physical body towards non-conceptualized consciousness. The existential courage to face death may also be significantly enhanced by such a shift.

Both No Free Will and Free Will

It is fair to ask whether the heroes described in the preceeding paragraph complete heroic acts through their own free will. One appears to need a history, a memory, and a story of what occurred in order to have free will. If this is true, it implies that the conceptually oriented remembering self is required to make this assertion. But if self-identity exists perceptually, without memory or the ability to develop an attributional story for being involved in the activity, then the requirements for invoking “free will” cannot be met. No conceptualized doer and no historical memory to justify why the heroism was performed can exist. In general, the view of the remembering self concurs with the notion of free will, whereas the view of the experiencing self appears to concur with the view that there is no free will. According to the theory, both free will and no free will can both be truthful views. It may simply be a matter of which information processing system’s point of view dominates at the time.
Efficacy of Mindfulness, Chant, Prayer, and Meditation

While not specifically designed as psychotherapy, but having the function of relieving stress and suffering, the satisfaction that one can get from mindfulness practice, chant, meditation, or prayer (if it is not just petitional) appears to contain the active component of shifting a person's view from the conceptual to the perceptual. As a common ingredient, all of these practices require the participant to orient to the present moment and away from a mind full of thoughts (i.e., concepts), typically through enhanced attentiveness. If population-based approaches to well-being are sought, methods such as mindfulness, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2012), or more generally as mindfulness practice in conjunction with the psycho-education may yield new types of helpful approaches to large-scale mental health care. All of the mindfulness-based therapies appear to be some of the more exciting new therapies. They not only help people identify the origins of their problems (i.e., cognitive distortions) but also point out a helpful way forward for them (i.e., provide the lived experience of a perceptual view). The practice of mindfulness offers the client a chance to release or extinguish inappropriate grasping tendencies and embody or model a more helpful felt experience. When the experiential view predominates, the grasping at concepts is weaker, so too may be the psychological defenses which are only conceptualizations themselves. This circumstance may give the client the opportunity and ability to reappraise their use and release those that are not beneficial. Believing it to be highly efficacious, this is the psycho-educational approach I use with my own clients. No other form of psychotherapy appears to claim this beneficial two-fold approach, except, perhaps for systematic desensitization as it has been used in the treatment of phobias.

Efficacy in Psychotherapy

The cause of the placebo effect, which was generally described above as resulting from a shift from a conceptual view toward a perceptual one, may also help explain the efficacy of certain psychotherapies (e.g., Rogerian “positive regard,” Freudian “free association,” as well as Beck’s cognitive–behavioral therapies and Ellis’s rational emotive therapies treatment generally termed the “restructuring of cognitive distortions”).

In light of dual information processing theory, one can view the Rogerian (Rogers, 1961) and, less obviously, the Freudian (Freud, 1932/1990) approaches as allowing the patient to learn and model the characteristics of the perceptual, experiencing self (e.g., present-moment oriented, reliance on images, associative connection, lack of conceptualizations). In both Beck’s (1979) and Ellis’s (2001) approaches, their therapies appear to help patients better understand specific occurrences of cognitive distortions. Presumably patients can generalize the use of the therapeutic techniques allowing them to understand and overcome a wider range of problems. Though modeling of the perceptual identity is not a specified purpose of these therapies, the releasing of inappropriately held conceptualizations of reality seems to make it a kindred process.

Meaning of Life or Experience of Life

Into the more philosophical implications, dual information processing theory can help us examine the important question of the “meaning of life.” It teaches that each of us has two views that can alternate in dominance, and the suggestion here is that both are true. In this way, life equally has meaning and it has no meaning. Of course the conceptual, rational-cognitive system seeks to find meaning in everything it sees, even at the expense of finding it when it is not there—as in cases of confabulation and pareidolia. As such, it can easily and almost certainly find some meaning in life. On the other hand, the perceptual, experiential processing system cannot form concepts or make meaning, even for the seemingly important task of finding meaningfulness ascribed to life and living. Again the answer comes via which information processing system one chooses to accept as a point of view. Having only the “experience of life” raises the interesting question of whether life is, or can be, gratifying without meaning attached to it. Perhaps by loosening our strong desire to make and
find meaning, life experiences will be more frequently and deeply appreciated, like easier access to awe and unity.

Origin of Spirituality

Perhaps paramount among the weightier philosophical questions to deal with by applying dual information processing theory may be the origin of spirituality. Many people report believing in or having a spiritual “feeling.” In terms of spirituality, Freud (1929/2010, p. 10) wrote about his friend,

This, he [Romain Rolland] says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of “eternity,” a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, “oceanic.”

A few pages later, he (Freud, 1929/2010, p. 14) writes:

If we may assume that there are many people in whose mental life this primary ego-feeling has persisted to a greater or less degree, it would exist in them side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart to it. In that case, the ideational contents appropriate to it would be precisely those of limitlessness and of a bond with the universe—the same ideas with which my friend elucidated the “oceanic” feeling.

Applying dual information processing theory to these remarks, which themselves seem to imply two views of reality, suggests that Freud’s “more sharply demarcated ego feeling of maturity” fits nicely within what has been here characterized as the conceptual, rational-cognitive system, while his friend Rolland’s feeling fits within the characteristics of the perceptual, experiential processing system. Rolland’s lived experience includes knowing without thought as well as being without the concept of time (i.e., eternity) or conceptual location—in short, a unified experience of the whole. It seems plausible that mystical/spiritual experiences may occur when all concepts drop away, yielding a perceptual worldview unadulterated by them. Of note is that the techniques that mystics rely on—silence, prayer, chant, attentive working, and meditation—all encourage the dropping of concepts and encountering experience more directly.

Conclusion

The discussion about dual information processing theory provided here might appear to some as unfairly balanced against the development and use of concepts by the rational-cognitive system. This has been intentional. Though concepts benefit us in many crucial ways, such as providing the basis language and communication, complex computations, and logical analyses, there are significant, underappreciated downsides that have long gone untested. This article hopes to draw attention to them. Those downsides are particularly evident when concepts co-opt sensory-perceptual experience, providing seemingly credible, but erroneous, short-hand replacements for more truthful lived experience.

Perhaps the concepts of “race,” “gender,” “age,” and so forth, encourage and even help retain the problems associated with them and so inadvertently reinforce division. It’s common that clients with generalized anxiety disorder anxiety who come for counsel are often surprised that the constellation of symptoms they feel can be termed anxiety. That word doesn’t match the lived experience they expected to feel with this diagnosis. Does the short hand “coffee aroma” enhance or trivialize all the indescribable complexity of that smell? Finally, is one’s own existence enhanced or trivialized by being categorized, boxed in, by the use of short hand descriptors confining our identities to our work function, family status, or community contributions? Though we transform the world into a conceptual one, the world in which we live first and fundamentally is a perceptual one. It can be appreciated and lived from directly without being lost in a sea of thought. In a life rebalanced toward the perceptual view, thought can become a tool that can be picked up as easily as it can be put down. For most it seems that the putting down is the challenge. Perhaps when dual information processing theory is understood more fully, many may find enough comfort in the competencies of the experiential system to relax their hold on the rational-cognitive.

Having applied dual information processing theory to an assortment of psychological and philosophical conundrums, this same approach may help with other stressful problems that have long withstood examination by rational-cognitive processing. Perhaps those involving
time, constancy, and sameness could benefit from this stratagem, given that dual information processing pivots strongly on the factors of time, memory, and fixedness. One important example delves into the qualities of sameness and continuity invested in the term “self-identity” as it relates to understanding the one who answers questions about living, health status or psychological well-being. Not only does one’s concept of self-identity change over time but, as has been shown here, it also can virtually change in any moment by shifting from a conceptual view to a perceptual one, or even vice versa. The constancy of a perceptual identity seems to accord better with that one thing that never changes in us. The implications of a self-identity with two frames of reference should resound loudly not only through the psychotherapeutic but also through the health services research communities. By not knowing which self answers research questions, the variability of responses may continue to be higher than necessary and the validity to be lower. Research aimed at understanding shifts of identity and artificially stabilizing its movement, perhaps through standardizing the time frame for the responses to be either in the “now” or at some other time, may be extraordinarily helpful for understanding the true benefits of treatments.

Finally, dual information processing theory may be helpful in counteracting the excessive levels of division and separation, as found in the societal woes of civil rights and the harmful acts of some organizations, businesses, governments, and individuals. Perhaps, if dual information processing theory’s emphasis on the perceptual, experiential processing system were widely communicated to general audiences, the negatives brought about by the erroneous and exclusive belief in a conceptual self-identity as fundamental to oneself might be alleviated. The personal and societal tendency toward finding irrelevant (and pernicious) differences between oneself and others might be overcome and replaced with a view that enhances unity and wholeness.

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