

ONE

Creating the Illusion of Duality

*Must it all be either less or more?
Either plain or grand?
Is it always 'or'?
Is it never 'and'?
– Stephen Sondheim¹*

Why move beyond duality, or the experience of our reality as a contrast of two parts or sides? Isn't duality a given in our universe? We talk about being right or wrong, being for or against an issue, being in or out of a group. It is easy to divide our lives into two categories. Dualistic thinking is familiar and takes little effort.

Actually, duality is *not* a given. It is a construct, a low-effort conceptual framework we use to make sense of our experience and of our complex universe. It is an assumption that we make, a habit of thinking or perceiving that we have collectively accepted as reality. It feels true because we create two-category distinctions (either/or) so frequently. We forget that *we* are the ones who create the categories. *We* are the ones who choose to limit those categories to two.

Managing Working Memory

Every minute we are bombarded by hundreds of stimuli—sensory input from visual cues, verbal chat, electronic messaging, various sounds, a range of odors, being touched, and so forth. We immediately capture many of these stimuli (known as “pre-attentive processing”) before our brain has a chance to filter out what it will pay attention to.¹ It is not physically possible for us to pay attention to all stimuli at once, and besides they are not all equally important to us. So we have a reflexive way of managing this deluge of data so that we don't become overwhelmed.

As humans, we come equipped with two basic storage capacities for stimuli²: short-term or “working” memory and long-term memory. While our long-term memory can store an almost infinite amount of information once we place it there, our working memory is similar to the random access memory (RAM) in computers. It has a limited active focus capacity of around five to nine items³ and a brief time frame of 10-15 seconds in which those items are first available.

We can think of the way we process stimuli as having two automatic sorting points in relation to our working memory: First we ask, “Do we need to process this at all?” We are continuously operating an initial “yes/no” decision-making program—“yes, I will process it” or “no, I will ignore it.” If we choose “no,” then we ignore it completely and have no memory of it at all (known as “inattentional blindness”).⁴ For example, if you walk into an unfamiliar room specifically to meet someone and are immediately engaged in conversation with them, you may fail to register details such as pictures on the wall or even other people in the room. In fact, there is recent evidence that being focused on a task that requires a lot of concentration can induce “inattentional blindness”—that is, we are so focused on remembering the task that we literally do not see what is right in front of us.⁵

Choosing “yes” (known as “attentional capture”) leads to the second sorting point: “Do we need to pay active, mindful attention?” Again we sort into two categories—what we need to be conscious or mindful of and what can be stored passively as part of a habitual (mindless) response. So while we may remain mindful of certain details, we absorb all the rest of the data “mindlessly” and without critical evaluation. In other words, while we sort or filter data based on what is important to us—what we value—we don’t examine the passively-processed data critically because they are not part of our immediate focus. This is important to remember when we examine why attitudes and beliefs become so difficult to change.

The difference in mindless and mindful processing explains, for example, how we can drive home along a familiar route and arrive safely without any conscious memory of the journey. While the data we observed were relevant to the drive (“yes, I will process it”), we were able to award it implicit or mindless attention. It also explains why experienced drivers can carry on an in-depth conversation while driving over familiar routes but need to stop the conversation in order to concentrate when following complex directions to a new destination.

Details do not have to be in our mindful awareness in order for us to be able to recall them later. The careful questioning of a witness often elicits data of which the witness was initially unaware. As early as the 1940s, there were public outcries over advertising with subliminal images below the level of our awareness because of not wanting to be unconsciously influenced—with good reason, as we are less able to resist subliminal messages.

This process of automatic either/or sorting becomes even more important as the amount of data increases. The rise in social media has had a potentially profound effect on how we manage our working memory. Not only has it dramatically increased the data flooding our senses every minute, but it has introduced new patterns of sensory engagement.

Many of us are finding it difficult to ignore social media input, even when we are engaged in an important conversation with a person who matters to us. That buzz or ding goes off signaling that we have a message and—oops—we look away to glance at it. In fact, there is now a growth industry in providing camps or retreats to help us go offline and interact with each other and the world of nature!

We experience “overload” if we try to hold and process too much information in our working memory. When that happens, we become confused, disoriented, overwhelmed, and irritable. It is in our best interest to process incoming data as quickly as possible to avoid overload and free up the “loading dock” of our working memory, so to speak, so quick methods work best.