11.2: What is Reality

Reality is not what is real. What is commonly called “reality” is created in the mind, based on an environment we observe. We all may share a common environment, like this textbook you are reading, but we all have a different interpretation of what we are experiencing. Some may think this is a great textbook, while others may look at it as a horrible ordeal. Hopefully not too many view the text this way.

When I was younger and tending bar part-time to make ends meet, many of the cocktail waitresses were single parents. To some of them it was quite an ordeal. They would come to work describing how much trouble they had attempting to get things done, while also having to deal with their child. Other waitresses arrived at work describing what a great day they had with their little “partner.” Where one waitress saw her child as a negative handicap, the other saw her relationship with her child as a positive, enjoyable experience. Both situations were virtually identical. The two waitresses had just created different realities.

Reality is not what is “real,” it’s what we think is real. It is our interpretation of an environment. When two people’s realities differ about the same subject or situation, then conflict occurs. For example, if your reality of global warming were that it is a hoax, and my reality is that global warming is real and exacerbated by humans, the clash of these two realities would trigger conflict.
Psychologist Paul Watzlawick writes,

“The belief that one’s own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions. It becomes still more dangerous if it is coupled with the missionary zeal to enlighten the rest of the world, whether the rest of the world wishes to be enlightened or not.” ¹

Reference