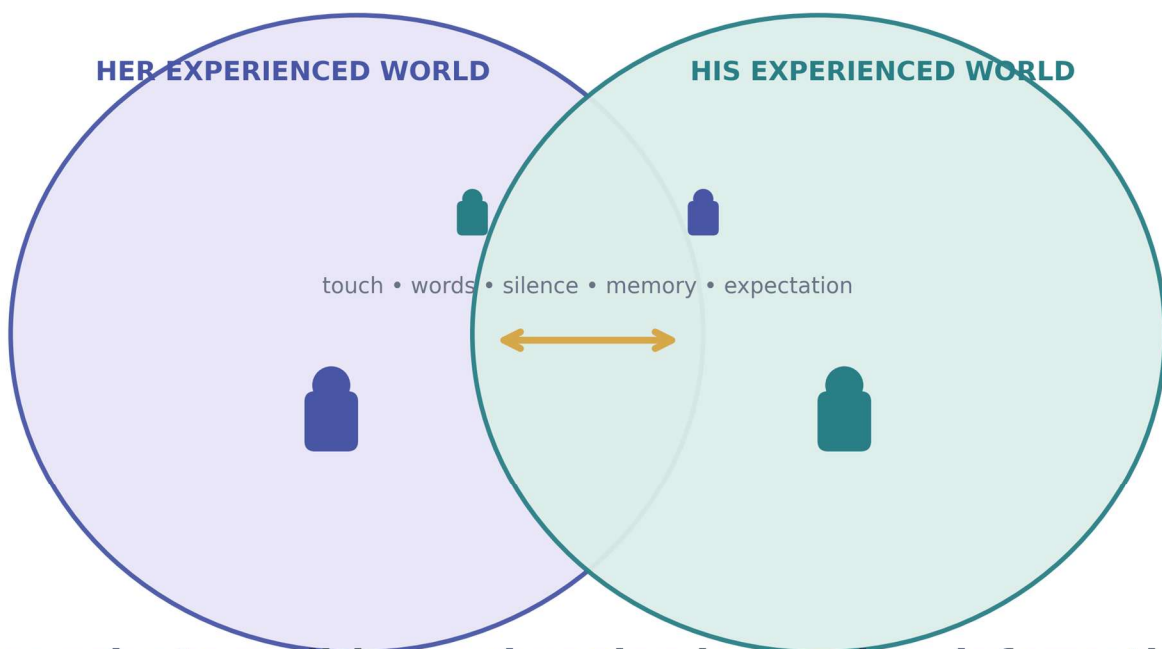


UNDERSTANDING REALITY IN A RELATIONSHIP

...where do you stand?

A reflective story about perception, intimacy, silence, imagination, and the images through which two people may come to know one another.



Two private realities exchanging incomplete information

"Perhaps a relationship is not one reality shared by two people, but two realities kept open to one another."

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A thought experiment—not a clinical, moral, or scientific verdict.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

An invitation, not a verdict

This article does not attempt to prove that a spouse is unreal, that imagination and physical interaction are identical, or that one interpretation of a relationship is superior to another. It begins from a narrower observation: whatever occurs between two people becomes available to each of them only as a private experience.

A look becomes an impression. A word becomes a meaning. Touch becomes a felt quality. Silence becomes a question. Memory supplies context. Expectation fills gaps. The other person may exist independently, yet the person we actually live with from moment to moment is also the person assembled within experience.

Working use of “virtual”

In this essay, virtual does not mean fake. It means internally rendered: an experience generated within the brain-body system and continually influenced—sometimes strongly, sometimes weakly—by information from outside it.

The fictional couple in the pages that follow—Leena and Daniel—are not meant to represent all women, all men, all marriages, or all reserved people. They are simply a stage on which a set of questions can be allowed to move.

The path through the story

- 1 A relationship begins before it begins
- 2 The person outside and the person within
- 3 The marriage of four figures
- 4 Imagined intimacy and physically shared intimacy
- 5 Reality with porous boundaries
- 6 A quiet evening
- 7 When silence becomes an image
- 8 When the image acts back
- 9 The remembered spouse, the expected spouse, the present spouse
- 10 Questions at the edge of the shared world

1

A relationship begins before it begins

Years before Leena met Daniel, she had a crush on someone else. Nothing dramatic happened. There were conversations, glances, a few moments that seemed unusually charged, and long stretches in which nothing was said at all.

The scarcity of information did not create an empty space. It created room. Leena imagined what the other person might have meant. She replayed small exchanges. She pictured conversations that had never occurred. At night, the relationship sometimes continued in dreams, where hesitation disappeared and the other person seemed to know exactly what she felt.

Perhaps he was thinking about her too. Perhaps he had constructed his own version of her—more confident, more available, more certain than the woman who actually stood before him. Perhaps each privately inhabited a relationship that resembled the other's. Or perhaps their inner stories had almost nothing in common.

Eventually their lives moved apart. What ended? A relationship? A possibility? Two private stories? Or merely the expectation that those stories might someday become mutually visible?

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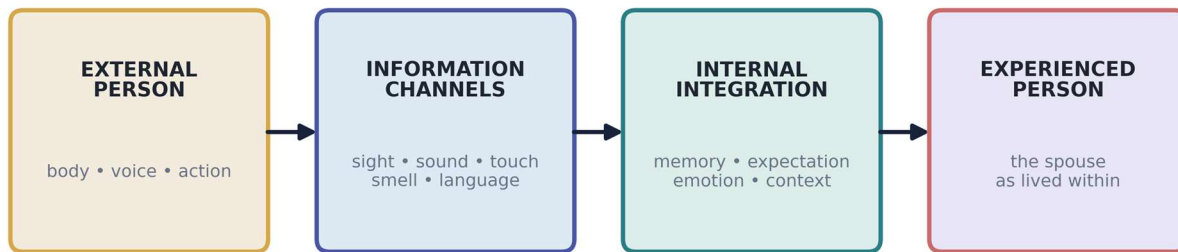
- **If two people privately imagine reciprocal affection, does a relationship already exist in any meaningful sense?**
- **Does mutual interest become “real” only when it is declared, acted upon, or confirmed?**
- **When an imagined future disappears, what exactly has been lost?**

2

The person outside and the person within

Years later, Leena married Daniel. His existence was no longer a matter of speculation. He occupied the same rooms, answered questions, made plans, forgot appointments, reached for her hand, laughed at certain jokes, and remained silent at moments when she expected words.

Yet even now, Leena did not receive Daniel in some unprocessed form. Light reflected from his face. Air carried his voice. Molecules contributed to his familiar smell. Pressure and temperature changed at the surface of her skin when he touched her. Her nervous system transformed these events into a lived person: Daniel as seen, heard, felt, remembered, interpreted, and anticipated.



The external person may be independent; the experienced person is internally assembled.

Figure 1. The independent person and the experienced person are not necessarily the same thing. The diagram illustrates a sequence, not a complete theory of consciousness.

Daniel underwent an equivalent process. He did not enter Leena’s private awareness. He encountered expressions, movements, words, touch, patterns, habits, and memories, then lived with the Leena assembled from them.

This does not make either spouse imaginary. It raises a different question: how much of the person one loves belongs to the person, and how much belongs to the mind that is doing the loving?

A scientific foothold

Mental imagery and perception are not identical, but research indicates that they can draw on overlapping neural systems. Studies of “reality monitoring” also ask how the mind distinguishes internally generated imagery from externally driven perception. Dreams offer an especially vivid example of a conscious world generated with reduced immediate input from the environment. [1–3]

3

The marriage of four figures

At first glance, a marriage contains two people. From the standpoint of lived experience, it may contain at least four: the actual woman, the actual man, the woman represented within the man’s experience, and the man represented within the woman’s experience.

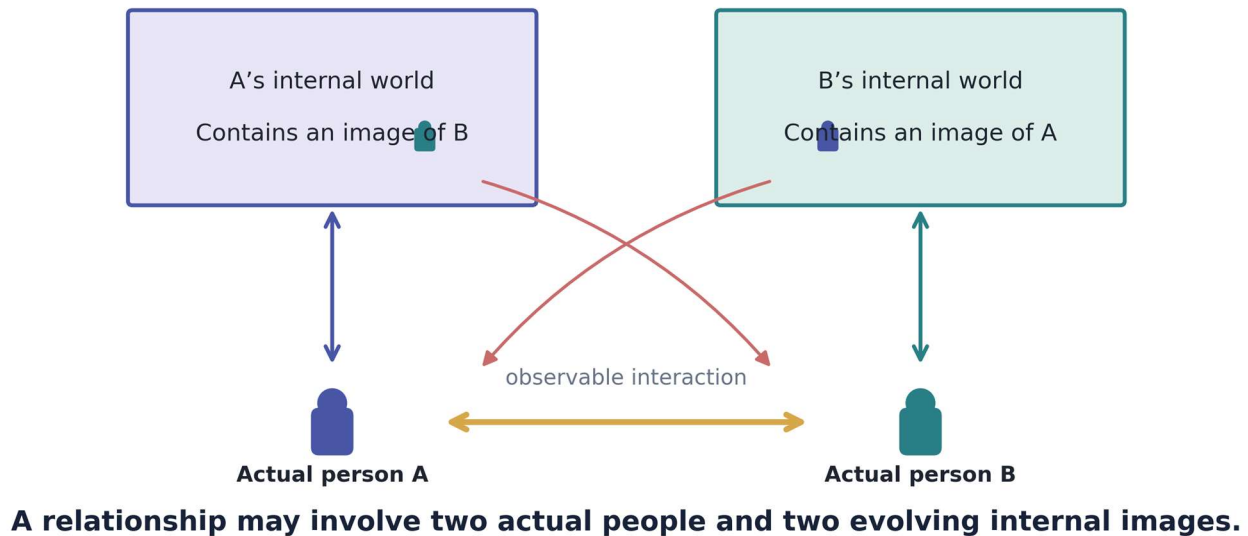


Figure 2. Two people can interact physically while each also carries an evolving internal image of the other.

The internal images are not static portraits. They are working models. They help each spouse predict what the other will say, what silence means, which topics are dangerous, which gestures imply affection, and which promises are likely to be kept.

A spouse may therefore respond not only to what the other person has just done, but also to what the internal model predicts that action means. A brief delay may become indifference. A practical question may become criticism. A quiet act of care may become proof of devotion—or pass unnoticed because it does not match the expected form of love.

PAUSE HERE

- When someone says, “I know my spouse,” what is actually known: the person, the history, a predictive model, or some combination?
- Can an internal image ever be eliminated, or can it only be revised?
- Would a relationship without image-building be possible—or even intelligible?

4

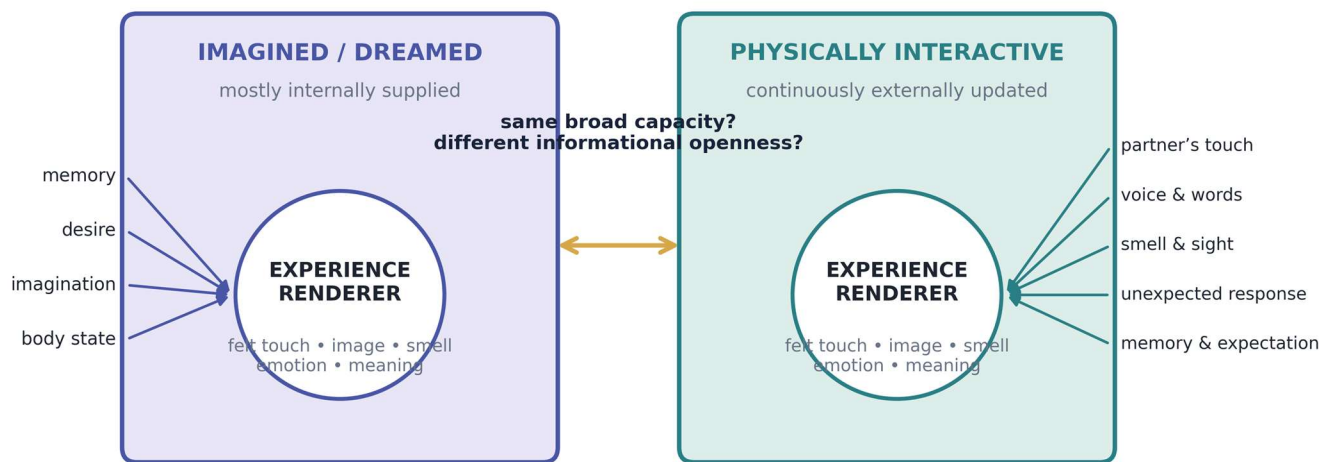
Imagined intimacy and physically shared intimacy

Leena remembered the earlier crush. In imagination and dreams, closeness had once felt immediate. The person was represented; touch was anticipated or felt; emotion arose; a future briefly seemed present.

Physical intimacy with Daniel appeared to belong to another category. Daniel was there. His body supplied touch, warmth, movement, scent, sound, timing, hesitation, surprise, and response. Yet each of these

became intimacy only after it was converted into Leena's experience. Daniel supplied signals; her experiential system rendered their felt form and meaning.

Does that make imagined intimacy and physically shared intimacy equal? The question may be too large for a single answer. Equal in what sense—source, vividness, embodiment, reciprocity, consequence, moral status, neural implementation, or first-person feeling?



The diagram poses a question; it does not settle whether the two experiences are equal.

Figure 3. A deliberately unresolved comparison: similar broad experiential capacities may operate under very different conditions of informational openness.

The imaginary encounter may be comparatively closed, built largely from memory, desire, expectation, and bodily state. The physical encounter may be comparatively open, continuously interrupted and revised by signals from an independent person. But does increased openness produce a different type of experience, or does it alter the informational content of the same broad experience-building process?

PAUSE HERE

- Is the difference between fantasy and waking intimacy a difference of kind, or a difference in how much outside information constrains the experience?
- If a dreamed touch and a waking touch are both felt internally, where should their equality begin—and where should it end?
- Does another person create the experience, or provide information that an experiencing system turns into intimacy?

5

Reality with porous boundaries

Imagine each person's experience as a room. The room can generate scenes from within: memories, plans, worries, dreams, rehearsed arguments, anticipated embraces. But the room is not sealed. It has openings

through which information arrives—sight, sound, touch, smell, language, behavior, and the consequences of action.

A fantasy may contain a represented partner who responds as the imagining mind permits. A physically present spouse is different in one unmistakable way: the spouse can surprise the model. The spouse can refuse, misunderstand, correct, consent, object, laugh unexpectedly, or reveal an inner history that the model never contained.

Does this independence destroy experiential equivalence? Or does it create what might be called porous equivalence: the same private theater with more openings through which uncontrollable information can enter?

Porous informational boundaries

The phrase is a metaphor. It asks us to consider whether waking interaction is best understood not as the absence of internal construction, but as internal construction maintained under continuous pressure from signals whose source is not under the experiencer's control.

The openings are imperfect. A look can be missed. A sentence can be ambiguous. A gesture may be culturally unfamiliar. Even touch does not reveal the other person's private meaning. Information passes; certainty does not.

6

A quiet evening

One evening, Leena and Daniel sat at the dinner table. Daniel spoke little. He ate slowly, looked tired, and answered with short sentences. Nothing openly hostile occurred.

Inside Daniel's experience, the silence may have meant comfort. Perhaps he was relieved to be home. Perhaps he felt no need to perform conversation. Perhaps work had consumed his attention. Perhaps he was afraid that words would expose a worry he did not yet understand. Perhaps he was indeed withdrawing.

Inside Leena's experience, the same silence acquired a different shape. It felt like distance. The quiet did not remain empty; it became a surface on which possible meanings appeared.

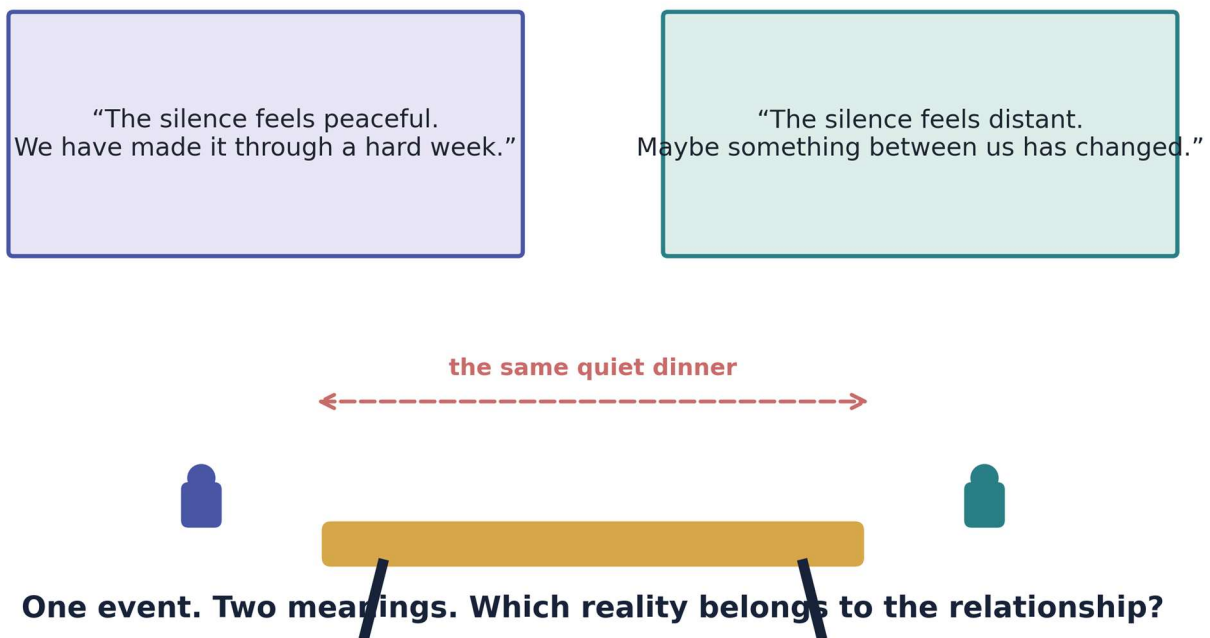


Figure 4. The same observable evening can support different private realities.

Neither experience could be read directly from the room. The dinner was observable. Its meaning was not.

PAUSE HERE

- Is silence a fact while its meaning is a construction?
- Which reality belongs to the marriage: Daniel's meaning, Leena's meaning, the observable behavior, or the interaction among all three?
- Can two people share an event while never sharing what the event is?

7

When silence becomes an image

It is tempting to call Daniel an introvert and stop there. But introversion does not automatically mean poor communication, emotional distance, or inability to be responsive. The more relevant issue is informational visibility: how much of one person's inner state becomes legible to the other?

When signals are sparse or ambiguous, the observing mind does not necessarily wait in neutrality. It may borrow from earlier relationships, family patterns, expectations, insecurities, hopes, and recent disappointments. Missing information is completed with available material.

Leena might think, "He is tired." She might think, "He is peaceful." She might think, "He is losing interest." Each thought changes the Daniel she experiences—even before Daniel does anything new.

Relationship research distinguishes between a partner's behavior and perceived partner responsiveness: whether a person experiences the partner as understanding, validating, and caring. The perception itself

can influence closeness and behavior, while still being only one person's access to what the partner intended. [4–5]

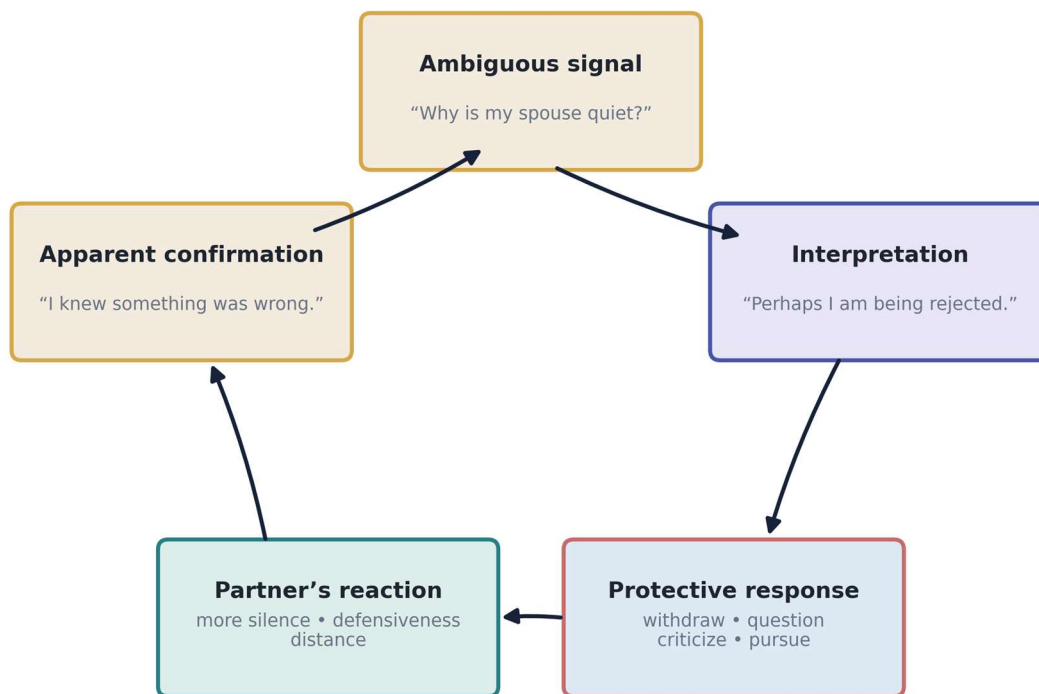
A caution about the story

The essay does not diagnose Leena, Daniel, introverts, or couples. Ambiguity can be filled optimistically, pessimistically, accurately, or inaccurately. The question is not who is at fault, but how an experienced person is assembled when information is incomplete.

8

When the image acts back

Suppose Leena interprets the silence as rejection. She becomes guarded. Daniel experiences her guardedness as criticism and retreats. Leena sees the retreat and feels confirmed. The image has not remained inside her; it has altered her behavior, entered Daniel's experience, and returned in changed form.



At what point does an interpretation begin to help create the reality it predicts?

Figure 5. A possible self-reinforcing loop. It is one pathway among many, not an inevitable sequence.

At this point, what is real? The original interpretation may have been mistaken. The defensive behavior is real. Daniel's reaction is real. Leena's sense of confirmation is real as an experience. The relationship may now contain the very distance she first feared.

An internal image can therefore become causally active. It can guide tone, attention, withdrawal, pursuit, affection, suspicion, or generosity. Through behavior, it may help produce an external situation that resembles the internal expectation.

PAUSE HERE

- **When an expectation helps produce the response it predicted, was the expectation false, true, or self-fulfilling?**
- **Can a relationship be changed by a person who exists mainly as an image in the partner's mind?**
- **At what point does perceived reality become enacted reality?**

9

The remembered spouse, the expected spouse, the present spouse

Years of marriage produce an enormous archive. A particular tone recalls an old argument. A scent restores a distant trip. A gesture means more because it resembles a thousand earlier gestures. The present spouse arrives carrying the remembered spouse.

The expected spouse arrives too. Daniel may not yet have answered, but Leena already anticipates the answer. Leena may not yet have reacted, but Daniel prepares for the reaction he has learned to expect. Prediction makes ordinary life efficient; it can also make the present difficult to see.

Perhaps the spouse experienced today is a layered composition:

The remembered spouse	Built from accumulated history and emotionally weighted episodes.
The expected spouse	Built from predictions about what the partner will think, feel, or do next.
The present spouse	Built from current signals—some noticed clearly, others filtered through memory and expectation.

Which of these is the person one is actually responding to at any given moment? Can they be separated? Should they be? Would love without memory become shallow? Would love without expectation become impossible to coordinate? Could love dominated by memory and expectation become unable to encounter change?

10

Questions at the edge of the shared world

Leena and Daniel remain at the table. Perhaps one of them speaks. Perhaps neither does. Perhaps the silence is repaired, perhaps it is misread, perhaps it becomes a familiar ritual, or perhaps years later each remembers that evening as the moment something changed.

The story offers no authoritative ending because the questions do not belong only to Leena and Daniel. They sit quietly inside ordinary statements: “I know you.” “You never listen.” “I can tell what you are thinking.” “We experienced it together.” “You have changed.” “You are imagining things.”

What do these statements assume about access to another person?

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

- Do two people ever inhabit one relationship, or do they inhabit two private relationships that partially overlap?
- Is the “real spouse” the independent person, the experienced person, the remembered person, or the person continually negotiated between them?
- Does physical presence replace imagination—or make imagination answerable to information?
- When communication is thin, who fills the missing person?
- Can love be understood as an image that remains willing to be corrected?
- If every encounter is internally rendered, what exactly do we mean when we call one experience real and another imagined?

Perhaps the most honest answer is not a conclusion, but another question:

*When you look at the person you love, how much of that person are you seeing—
and how much are you completing?*

A brief note on science and metaphor

The essay uses “virtual,” “rendered,” “porous,” and “internal image” as conceptual language. These terms should not be taken to imply a literal screen in the brain, a tiny observer watching an inner movie, or a settled scientific theory that waking perception, dreaming, imagination, and intimate interaction are identical.

The scientific literature provides narrower footholds. Mental imagery and perception can engage overlapping systems, yet they also differ in direction of information flow and signal strength. Dreams demonstrate that rich conscious experience can arise with reduced immediate environmental constraint. Predictive-processing frameworks explore how prior expectations and incoming signals may jointly shape perception, while reviews emphasize that the framework remains debated and does not explain every aspect of experience. Relationship science shows that perceived responsiveness—how understood, cared for, or validated a partner feels—can matter in intimacy, but perception is not the same as perfect access to the partner’s private state.

These findings motivate the questions in the article. They do not decide the philosophical answers.

Selected sources and further reading

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This article is designed to be read slowly—and argued with.
