

CONSCIOUSNESS: THE DAMNEDEST THING A YOUNG PERSON'S GUIDE TO THE ROOTS OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: A father explores the nature of consciousness in dialogue with his daughter.

KEYWORDS: Consciousness; Unconscious; Self; Objectivity; nondual; Sigmund Freud; Carl Jung; Julian Jaynes; William James; Ronald David Laing; Martin Buber; Søren Kierkegaard; Gregory Bateson

THE SITUATION IS TROUBLESOME.

Consciousness" is a word worn smooth by a million tongues. Depending upon the figure of speech chosen it is a state of being, a substance, a process, a place, an epiphenomenon, an emergent aspect of matter, or the only true reality.

George Miller, (1966, p. 40)

AND WORSE:

For twenty years past I have mistrusted "consciousness" as an entity; for seven or eight years past I have suggested its non-existence to my students, and tried to give them its pragmatic equivalent in realities of experience. It seems time that the hour is ripe for it to be openly and universally discarded.

William James, (1904, p. 477)

THE DIALOGUE

Daughter: What does *consciousness* mean? My teacher says that people have consciousness, but rabbits and bugs may not have it.

Father: Daughter, it means to have *experiences*.

D: Then it is subjective?

F: Yes, daughter. It is subjective.

D: Anything else?

F: Well, Daughter, once you've said that a person, or even a rabbit, has experiences, which of course are subjective, you seem to have said it all. Everyone does not agree with this idea though. Many philosophers, and some physicists and biologists, think of consciousness as a noun, implying that something is left over on the table when you take away subjective experience. They call it "consciousness," and it is something that you either have or don't have. For example, you may have it during the daytime when you are awake, but not have it at night when you are asleep, at least when you are not dreaming. Maybe bugs don't have it at all.

Some philosophers say that to have consciousness means that it is "like something" to be conscious. For example, a famous essay titled "What is it Like to be a Bat?" by philosopher Thomas Nagel (1974), pointed out that it is probably *like something* to be a brown bat, meaning the bat has some sort of experience or subjectivity, but it is probably not like anything to be a baseball bat. This seems to make sense.

D: But father, where did the idea of consciousness as something else, something objective and real, come from? It is a noun, isn't it?

F: Yes, Daughter, but before going further in that direction let's look a bit more carefully at the idea of what it means to be "objective." Here is a short dialogue on the topic between Gregory Bateson and his own daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, when she was young like yourself.

D (Mary): What does "objective" mean?

F (Gregory): Well. It means that you look very hard at those things which you choose to look at.

D: That sounds right. But how do the objective people choose which things they will be objective about?

F: Well. They choose those things about which it is easy to be objective.

D: You mean easy for them?

F: Yes.

D: But how do they know that those are the easy things?

F: I suppose they try different things and find out by experience.

D: So it's a subjective choice?

F: Oh, yes. All experience is subjective.

Gregory Bateson (1972/1987, pp. 55-56)

F: Interestingly, it turns out that the whole idea of objectivity as important for understanding things is fairly new. It came along in the 19th century as a way people framed knowledge. Before that the emphases tended to be on the pursuit of truth while avoiding illusions. The new stress on objectivity led to a view of a world that eventually resolved itself into two kinds of stuff: objective stuff and subjective stuff (Daston & Galison, 2007). It is not surprising that the notion of consciousness as a noun, something real in its own right, also became popular during this period. In fact, this is when the word ‘consciousness’ came to be commonly used to signify wakefulness as opposed to being unconscious. For instance, one would speak of losing and regaining consciousness as in sleeping and waking. This was also when the phrase “self-conscious” became common, meaning embarrassment when you are being stared at. In that sense it means to experience oneself objectively, or as an object.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE EGO

F: But let’s not get too far afield from consciousness. When René Descartes published his famous *Meditations on the First Philosophy* in 1641, he was very concerned about speaking truthfully, and not being fooled by any illusions that could be cast over him by some demon. This was a philosophical point really; I don’t think he was personally superstitious. You see, the point is, though, that he was thinking in terms of truth and illusion.

But in the process of his reflections--and here is the key point--he ended up inventing an inner actor, a “self” or “ego.” (I will use these terms more or less synonymously for our conversation here). He thought of this ego, or self, as looking out at the world and trying to understand it truthfully from its inner location. The British philosopher John Locke soon followed suite, and between the two of them the notion of an inner actor, ego or self, became part of the “furnishings” of the mind, to use Locke’s term.

So, coming on down to the present, we seem to have inherited the idea that we each have an ego or self, looking out objectively at an external material world. When this notion came into full bloom in the late 1800s, it gave birth to the widespread cultural idea of a whole inner person. It was not long until folks like Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, William James and others, began to explore this inner person with the thought that it might have characteristics unsuspected by the waking mind. Novels such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896), and *Dracula* (1897) explored the darker hidden dimensions of its nature. Even today many people are still acquainted with the 1884 novel, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, written by an English school teacher, Edwin Abbott, to illustrate mathematically the possibility of a hidden fourth

dimensional reality unsuspected by ordinary folks. Many people in those days believed in a fourth dimension as a kind of spiritual reality. Others of that period celebrated the broader numinous potentials of consciousness beyond ordinary awareness. For example, William James (1909) wrote that “We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep,” while Jung’s “collective unconscious” implied a vast and deep reach of the human psyche. In 1903 the great observer of the human mind, Frederic W. H. Myers, now nearly forgotten, wrote “In the boundless ocean of mind innumerable currents and tides shift with the shifting emotion of each soul” (p. 245).

D: But tell me father, where are the ego or the self really located?

F: The mind, Daughter, seems to be the residence of the ego or the self. But it is a house of mirrors where experience reflects back on itself again and again, forming arabesques of thoughts, memories, and feelings, much like light trapped in a diamond.

D: Where is experience itself in this inner house of mirrors? Where is “consciousness”?

F: According to one widely read psychologist, Julian Jaynes, it is commonly felt to be inside the head. He wrote,

We not only locate this space of consciousness inside our own heads. We also assume it is there in others. In talking with a friend, maintaining periodic eye-to-eye contact (that remnant of our primate past when eye-to-eye contact was concerned in establishing tribal hierarchies), we are always assuming a space behind our companion’s eyes into which we are talking, similar to the space we imagine inside our own heads where we are talking from.

And this is the very heartbeat of the matter. For we know perfectly well that there is no such space in anyone’s head at all! There is nothing inside my head or yours except physiological tissue of one sort or another. And the fact that it is predominantly neurological tissue is irrelevant.

Now this thought takes a little thinking to get used to. It means that we are continually inventing these spaces in our own and other people’s heads, knowing perfectly well that they don’t exist anatomically; and the location of these ‘spaces’ is indeed quite arbitrary. The Aristotelian writings, for example, located consciousness or the abode of thought in and just above the heart, believing the brain to be a mere cooling organ since it was insensitive to touch or injury. And some readers will not have found this discussion valid since they locate their thinking selves somewhere in the upper chest. For most of us, however, the habit of locating consciousness in the head is so ingrained that it is difficult to think otherwise. But, actually you could, as you remain where you are, just as well locate your consciousness around the corner in the next room against the wall near the floor, and do your thinking there as well as in your head.

Julian Jaynes (1976, p.44-45).

D: Now I am getting confused. Is experience in the head or around the corner in the next room against the wall near the floor? And how does one find one's own ego or self?

F: The psychiatrist and social critic Ronald David Laing once wrote,

One tries to get inside oneself
that inside of the outside
that one was once inside
once one tries to get oneself inside what
one is outside:
to eat and to be eaten
to have the outside inside and to be
inside the outside.

Ronald David Laing (1970, p.83).

Nicely said, but no one surpasses Søren Kierkegaard for this kind of thing. Of the self he writes:

The self is a relation which relates itself to its own self, or it is that in the relation [which accounts for it] that the relation relates itself to its own self; the self is not the relation but [consists in the fact] that the relation relates itself to its own self. If the relation relates itself to its own self, the relation is then the positive third term, and this is the self.

Søren Kierkegaard (1849/1941, p.9).

D: Oh my! I give up for now. But Daddy, here's a good question. Can two people share the same experience??

F: This is an excellent question Daughter. Let's begin by recognizing that consciousness, or experience, always comes in *perspectives*. If we are experiencing our own feelings and thoughts, for example, we are taking a first person perspective, using words such as "I" and "me." If we see the world objectively, as objects and events, we are talking a third-person perspective, using words such as "it" and "they." But if we experience ourselves in relationship with others, then we are experiencing the second-person perspective, using words like "us" and "we." To take this a step further, if we sense our own experience to be unified with the experience of another person, then we are experiencing true *intersubjectivity*. I'll say more about this in a minute.

Now, if you think of consciousness as a thing, a noun, and each of us has one, then each person's experience is as separate from the experiences of others as the individual

atoms the Greek philosopher Democritus wrote about in the 5th century B.C., and which both Newton and Descartes thought to be the basis of all matter. So the idea of consciousness as a noun, and each of us has one, fits very well the classical view for a universe made of separate objects. Unfortunately, modern physics has no such atoms. In fact, like the modern ruminants of many ancient ideas, experience itself is more like the modern probability cloud model of the atom, with parts appearing here and there at their own pleasure. In fact, as we learned from Julian Jaynes, it is hard to say experience or consciousness is in any particular place at all.

A little over a century ago, one of the greatest observers of experience, William James, wrote,

The breaches between such thoughts [of different people; here James means any subjective experience] are the most absolute breaches in nature. Everyone will recognize this to be true... The universal conscious fact is not 'feelings and thoughts exist,' but 'I think' and 'I feel.'

William James (1890, p. 250)

Very eloquent, but wrong. Had James been writing a few decades later, he would have been familiar with the concepts of quantum entanglement and the singlet state. The basic idea is that when two particles interact in an intimate way, for example by collision or having actually been a single particle at one time, they afterwards remain “entangled” or in a “singlet” state. The explanation gets technical, involving spin vectors and so on, but the bottom line is that their fates are now intertwined. A measurement on one of these particles will always have a known relationship with measurements on the other, no matter where they each go in the universe. They’re now entangled in the singlet state, and no longer independent of one another. In some sense they remain a single particle till the end of time.

Something like this seems to be created between two or more people when they share a powerful common experience. Examples of such shared experiences include love making, listing together to touching pieces of music, and certain group rituals. Interestingly, the sense of sharing emotional experiences with another was an important feature of early psychoanalysis that Freud wrote about in his descriptions of the relationship with his or her patient (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2016).

Of course, one can go through such many situations with others and remain quite isolated. I am reminded of a psychiatric patient who complained to R.D. Laing that he never made love to his wife. The wife, however, said that they frequently made love. In response to this, the man explained that this was fine for her, but he was always up on the ceiling looking down when they made love, and was not involved at all!

Most of us, however, who have been blessed with real lovers, experienced elevating music in the company of friends, or shared deeply moving rituals, well know the richness of shared experiences. I would say this is even experienced with much loved pets such as cats and dogs. Indeed, I have a crow who visits me regularly to share cashew nuts in the mornings, and looks at me affectionately like the old friend I have grown to be. To deny the depth and reality of such experiences is to reject an essential aspect of our humanity.

These are all examples of the second person perspective, in which we are very aware of our immediate relationship with other human beings or even with animals. The Israeli philosopher, Martin Buber, described this “I-Thou” relationship in the following terms.

When I confront a human being as my Thou and speak the basic word I-Thou to him, then he is no thing among things nor does he consist of things. He is no longer He or She, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition to be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light.

Martin Buber (1970, p. 59)

I-Thou relationships elicit an experience of intersubjectivity in which third-person perspectives dissolve into second-person perspectives, and sometimes even into a shared first-person perspective. It is as if you and the other person have become one being, sharing a palpable common experience. One philosopher who has written elegantly about this is Christian de Quincey (2011). He points out that we have tended to overlook this important dimension of our day to day experience because our culture has put such value on facts, information, and pieces of data, whereas the intimate connections between people tend to be sensed as feelings, and are all too easily overlooked or misinterpreted as purely first person occasions. Scientists spend a lot of time trying to prove that facts can be passed from person to person psychically, but the truth is that much more is passed from person to person through feelings. de Quincey actually makes an excellent case that relationships, that is second person experiences, are at the root of normal human experience, and not the first person kinds of occasions that Descartes and Locke stressed. He observes that **we probably all participate and experience intersubjectively with other human beings, and at least some of us with other animals, pretty much all of the time. But we don't notice it because of the “fish in water” syndrome.**

Incidentally, the concept of shared or “collective” or “intersubjective” consciousness is not at all new, but is only recently getting wide recognition. Carl Jung

and William James, among many others, believed in a broad unconscious foundation for human experience. They tended to talk about it, however, in the *third person*, as something that exists objectively “out there,” or alternatively inside somewhere. But as we see, true intersubjective experiences seem very common, if you just allow yourself to look for them.

D: OK Daddy; one more question. What is nondual consciousness?

F: Well, it is of course nondual *experience*, and how it is reported seems to depend in good part on who is having it. But to think more deeply on the topic, we might say that nondual consciousness is experience with the first-person removed. The nondual experiencer continues to be conscious of the outside world (the objective third person), and relationships with others (the second person perspective), but the first-person perspective is absent, so that there is little or no sense of ego or self. Such a person has become egoless or selfless, in the literal sense.

D: Father, but here is another question I've been wanting to ask you. Do you need a brain?

F: That's an excellent question Daughter. We will talk about it after dinner.

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