
SECTION ONE



THE RIDDLE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the development of consciousness.

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THE STUDY of consciousness and altered states of consciousness is central to transpersonal psychology. Yet there is remarkably little discussion of what consciousness is. This dearth of discussion mirrors psychology in general, which under the sway of behaviorism and the quest for objectivity long dismissed consciousness as a topic unfit for polite conversation. Although it regained partial respectability in the eighties, confusion continues regarding the nature, importance, and even existence of consciousness, let alone the best means to study it.²

This confusion in psychology reflects centuries of confusion in philosophy. Indeed, the nature of consciousness is one of the most fundamental and difficult of all philosophical questions. At one extreme consciousness has been dismissed as fictitious, "the name of a nonentity," according to William James. At the other extreme it has been lauded as the fundamental substrate of reality (a philosophical position known as absolute idealism). It also has been regarded as a mere epiphenomenon of matter (materialism) or as one aspect of a more basic reality that is fundamentally neither mental nor physical but can exhibit qualities of both (dual aspect theory, or neutral monism). Consciousness has been looked down on as a disease

of life (Nietzsche) and looked up to as infinite being-bliss: the *Sat-chit-ananda* (being-consciousness-bliss) of Vedanta. Small wonder, then, that "so far there is no good theory of consciousness. There is not even agreement about what a theory of consciousness would be like."³

For most of psychology and science, consciousness is an epiphenomenon not readily amenable to scientific research, while for much of Western philosophy consciousness is a classical conundrum that does not yield to conceptual analysis. Somehow consciousness seems to slip through scientific research and conceptual analysis like water through a net.

Yet from the perspective of several Eastern and some Western philosophical and religious traditions, this is to be expected. While most of Western psychology assumes that consciousness is a property or product of the personal mind and brain, these traditions assume that consciousness is an aspect of the Absolute, Atman-Brahman, God, Void, or Mind.

According to these traditions, our usual state of mind is said to be clouded, deluded, dreamlike, or entranced. In this state we assume that the individual psyche is the source of consciousness rather than a creation or component of it. Here are the words of Patanjali, who compiled the classic text of yoga:

*The mind does not shine by its own light.
It too is an object, illumined by the Self. . . .
But the Self is boundless.
It is the pure Consciousness that illumines the
contents of the mind. . . .
Egoism, the limiting sense of "I," results from the
individual intellect's attributing the power of
consciousness to itself.⁴*

In this view, consciousness is not personal but transpersonal, not mental but transmental. In fact, as an aspect of the Absolute, it is said to be beyond space, time, qualities, concepts, categories, and limits of any kind. Hence, the ultimate nature of consciousness is said to be intangible and inconceivable. Even to attempt to describe this reality results in a paradox whereby, as Kant discovered, the opposite of any apparently valid statement is also valid. Almost fifteen hundred years before Kant, Nagarjuna—the founder of Madhyamaka Buddhism—reached virtually the same conclusion, "a conclusion echoed and amplified in succeeding generations by every major school of Eastern philosophy and psychology: Reason cannot grasp the essence of absolute reality, and when it tries, it generates only dualistic incompatibilities."⁵

From this perspective, then, it is not surprising that most schools of

Western philosophy, psychology, and science have failed to grasp the nature of consciousness. For in the words of the Third Zen Patriarch:

*To seek Mind with the (discriminating) mind
is the greatest of all mistakes. . . .
The more you talk about it
The further astray you wander from the truth.⁶*

It is a mistake because, to use contemporary language, it is a "category error." That is, it is an attempt to use what St. Bonaventure called the eye of flesh (sensory perception) or the eye of mind (logic and philosophy), and their combination (science) to see what can only be seen with the eye of contemplation.⁵

The Asian traditions agree with St. Bonaventure. Consciousness cannot be perceived or adequately conceived; it can only be known through direct intuition. This direct intuition of consciousness and the transmental domain is said to develop wisdom (*prajna*) that allows one to escape from our distorted view of consciousness, self, and world.

The way out of this distortion is obviously to change our state of mind. Indeed, it is intriguing that although humans might not know what consciousness is, they have poured enormous effort into altering their experience of it. A cross-cultural survey found that fully 90 percent of several hundred societies had institutionalized one or more altered states.⁷ People in traditional societies almost always view these states as sacred. Andrew Weil concluded that the "desire to alter consciousness periodically is an innate normal drive analogous to hunger or the sexual drive."⁸

From a perspective that regards consciousness as unchangeable and unqualifiable, the idea of changing states of consciousness makes no sense. What is really being changed is states of mind. Most Western psychologists, however, operate from the implicit assumption that consciousness is a function of the individual psyche and consequently speak of "states of consciousness." Because this term is so common in the literature we use it here as necessary.

One of the early assumptions about altered states of consciousness (ASCs) induced by practices such as meditation or yoga was that they were more or less equivalent. This reflected our ignorance of the broad range of possible ASCs. For example, the varieties of ASC that have been identified in Indian meditative and yogic practices alone include highly concentrated states such as the yogic samadhis or Buddhist jhanas; witness-consciousness states in which equanimity is so strong that stimuli have little or no effect on the observer; and states in which extremely refined inner stimuli become the objects of attention, such as the faint inner sounds of shabd yoga. Some practices lead to unitive states in which

the sense of separation between self and world dissolves, as in some Zen satoris. In other states all objects or phenomena disappear, as in the Buddhist nirvana or Vedantic nirvikalpa samadhi; and in still others all phenomena are perceived as expressions or modifications of consciousness, such as sahad samadhi.^{9,10}

Until recently many of these states were regarded as pathological. There are several reasons for this. In the West we have traditionally recognized only a limited number of states of consciousness—waking, sleeping, and intoxication, for example—and have tended to deny or pathologize others. Witness the nineteenth-century surgeons who observed a leg amputation performed painlessly under hypnosis and concluded that the patient was a hardened rogue, bribed to pretend he felt no pain. As psychologist Charles Tart concluded, “they must have had very hard rogues in those days.”¹¹ This dovetails with the tendency in clinical psychiatry and anthropology to pathologize unusual experiences, especially those of people from other cultures, and to assume that our own usual state is optimal.

Most researchers have had little direct experience of the ASCs they investigate. Yet classical descriptions, psychological and philosophical arguments, and personal reports by trained Western researchers^{11,12} suggest that it may be difficult to fully appreciate and comprehend altered states without direct experience of them. Indeed, such experiences can radically alter one's worldview, and those who have them are particularly likely to regard consciousness as the primary constituent of reality.²

So Western academic evaluations of the altered states of consciousness induced by meditative-yogic disciplines have undergone a dramatic shift. Many initial evaluations assumed that such states were pathological, whereas several hundred studies now attest to their potential benefits. Historically, their goal of mystical union was regarded as the *summum bonum*, the greatest good and highest aspiration of human existence.

The existence of a wide range of states raises four key questions: (1) Which states are beneficial and transformative and which are dangerous and destructive? (2) How can we strengthen healthy states and transform destructive ones? These two questions are discussed in other sections of this book. (3) How can we identify, characterize, map, and compare individual states? (4) How can we develop an overarching framework or theory that lays out the whole spectrum of consciousness and the place of individual states within it? These two questions are the subject of the following essays.

In “Psychology, Reality, and Consciousness,” Daniel Goleman points out that Western psychology is only one of many psychologies, some of them thousands of years old. Each psychology, indeed each culture, constructs a worldview and codifies experience in specific ways. Goleman

suggests that Western psychology and culture have been largely unistate, focusing on our usual waking state. This has left us relatively unsophisticated about, and suspicious of, altered states and the means to induce them.

By comparison, many Eastern psychologies and cultures are multistate. They value altered states and have developed sophisticated techniques for inducing them and maps for describing them. Goleman concludes that integrating different psychologies may enrich both East and West.

In "Psychologia Perennis," Ken Wilber points out that throughout history a perennial philosophy and psychology have described many states of consciousness ranged along a spectrum. Different psychologies and therapies address different levels of this spectrum and can therefore be seen as complementary rather than oppositional. Each level is associated with specific experiences and a specific sense of identity, ranging from the drastically narrowed identity associated with egocentricity to that known as the Supreme Identity or cosmic consciousness, which has been considered both the source and goal of the great religions.

Charles Tart offers a valuable means for understanding altered states via "A Systems Approach to Consciousness." He points out that a state of consciousness is a highly complex system constructed of components such as attention, awareness, identity, and physiology. Different dynamic patterns of these components result in different states, and techniques for altering consciousness change patterns by modifying one or more components.

In "Mapping and Comparing States," Roger Walsh responds to two questions that have puzzled Western researchers ever since they realized that contemplative practices elicit ASCs: (1) Are the states induced by different practices identical or different? (2) Are they pathological and regressive or healthy and transcendent? The debate has persisted because until now there has been no way to precisely describe and compare states of consciousness. Walsh compares the states occurring in shamanism, Buddhism, yoga, and acute schizophrenia and shows that they differ significantly on several key dimensions of experience.

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