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FROM : R Walsh & F Vaughan (eds) BEYOND EGO:
TRANSPERSONAL DIMENSIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY.
Los Angeles: JP Tarcher 1980.

THE NATURE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Insofar as we are a mental process, we must expect the natural world to show similar characteristics of mentality.

GREGORY BATESON'

Until recently, Western psychology has largely ignored the study of consciousness. Like the proverbial fish that remains unaware of the existence of water, consciousness, as the matrix of all experience, has been given little attention by comparison with behavior. Consciousness was not a suitable subject for the tools and philosophy of Western science, which were designed to observe and measure objective material phenomena. This technical problem still remains, but recently consciousness has at last become a respectable topic for investigation.

In various Eastern psychologies a very different situation has prevailed. Consciousness has been viewed not only as central, but as the primary constituent of reality. Clarifying one's consciousness has been regarded as the highest human goal and the path to psychological health and enlightenment. The consciousness disciplines and many of the religions of the East aim at doing just that. Transpersonal psychologists are interested in synthesizing this Eastern knowledge of consciousness with Western psychological concepts and empiricism.

The most dramatic incentive for this has been the recognition of a range of altered states of consciousness formerly unappreciated by Western psychology. With the advent of the psychedelics, and more recently the use of such consciousness-modifying technologies as meditation, yoga, and biofeedback, researchers have begun empirical investigation of altered-states phenomena. In addition, the study of the Eastern literature has revealed maps of states of consciousness that Western researchers,

such as those writing in this section, are beginning to understand and to link to Western concepts and empirical data.

It appears that the range of states of consciousness is considerably broader than previously recognized, extending from psychopathology, through our usual waking state, to a number of "higher" states. "Higher" states possess all the usual capacities plus additional ones and are sometimes accompanied by experiences of transcending the usual limits of awareness, ego, and identity.

Various functions and abilities have been noted to be state-dependent, i.e., limited by the state in which they occur. For example, in state-dependent learning what is learned in one state may not necessarily be remembered or comprehended in another. Similarly, with state-dependent communication, the insights of an individual in a particular state may not be comprehensible to another in a different state. This explains why many of the non-Western psychologies, consciousness disciplines, and religions have been so problematic for the West. Psychologists did not initially recognize that they represented technologies for inducing altered states, and hence that any assessment of them required an awareness of the limitations of state-dependent communication.

A growing interest in altered states and their implications for psychological well-being has brought consciousness into the foreground of transpersonal psychology. Acknowledging the centrality of consciousness does not necessarily imply a rejection of other psychological theories and models. Rather, it represents an attempt to view them from an expanded context that includes both Eastern and Western perspectives.

Because it is so central to a transpersonal perspective, consciousness is discussed in many sections of this book. For example, meditation, a cornerstone of most advanced psychological growth, may include training in the induction of a variety of altered states. Consciousness is both the means and goal of such efforts. Similarly, transpersonal psychotherapy adds to traditional therapeutic techniques a number of approaches aimed directly at altering consciousness. The development of consciousness is therefore closely related to mental health, and in some disciplines unconsciousness is described as the only illness.

The papers included in this section provide the best maps currently available of the major states of consciousness. In "Psychologia Perennis," Ken Wilber points out that throughout history there has existed a "perennial" philosophy or psychology that has maintained that there exist states of consciousness, superior to our usual one, that allow profound insight into the nature of reality and consciousness. He suggests that states of consciousness are ranged along a spectrum, representing different levels of expression of consciousness. Each level has associated with it a unique sense of experience and identity ranging from the experience variously known as Supreme Identity, Buddhahood, Christ consciousness, cosmic

consciousness or big Mind, which has been the source of the great religions and consciousness disciplines, all the way down to the drastically narrowed identity associated with egoic consciousness. Various psychologies, he suggests, have addressed different levels of this spectrum and hence should be seen as complementary rather than oppositional.

The spectrum of consciousness revealed across the centuries by the perennial psychology has found surprisingly close agreement in recent studies of psychedelics. Stanislav Grof, who has perhaps more clinical research experience with psychedelics than anyone else in the world, has found that they seem to lead through a series of experiences and states of consciousness. In "Realms of the Human Unconscious," he reports that *this progression reflects the uncovering of deeper and deeper layers of the unconscious*. This begins with traditional psychodynamic phenomena, progresses through Rankian-birth-trauma-like material and Jungian symbolism, and finally leads to a variety of transcendental experiences. Being last to emerge, these transpersonal states are assumed to represent the deepest known levels of the unconscious. These states and accompanying experiences not only closely resemble those described by advanced practitioners of the consciousness disciplines, but once experienced, allow significant insight and understanding of these traditions. Thus this area of research suggests that the potential for attaining deep transpersonal states, which may be interpreted either religiously or psychologically as one chooses, lies latent in us all. The potential of the psychedelics as research and therapeutic tools is apparent despite current unavailability for research.

The above papers clearly point to the idea that the human unconscious is not undifferentiated and homogenous, but rather is comprised of different levels and structures. In "A Developmental Model of Consciousness,"² Ken Wilber examines the development of these levels and structures of the unconscious and their attendant states of consciousness. He begins with the infantile and progresses through to the adult levels described by Western psychology. What is unique, however, is that he then continues following this developmental sequence through the unfolding of the successive structures of the unconscious and attendant states of consciousness that non-Western disciplines describe in the most psychologically developed and enlightened individuals.

Another way of conceptualizing consciousness and altered states is employed by Charles Tart who adopts "A Systems Approach to States of Consciousness." He points out that a state of consciousness is a highly complex system constructed by components such as attention/awareness and identity. Different dynamic patterns of these components result in different states, and techniques for altering consciousness can be viewed as means for disrupting preexisting patterns by modifying one or more components. This systems approach provides a bridge that allows certain

aspects of non-Western knowledge to be reconceptualized within a Western framework.

Notes

1. Bateson, G. *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979.
2. An expanded version of this paper is available in: Ken Wilber, *The Atman project*. Wheaton, Ill.: Theosophical Publishing House, 1980.