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**By: J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann, Editors**

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**Altered States of Consciousness**

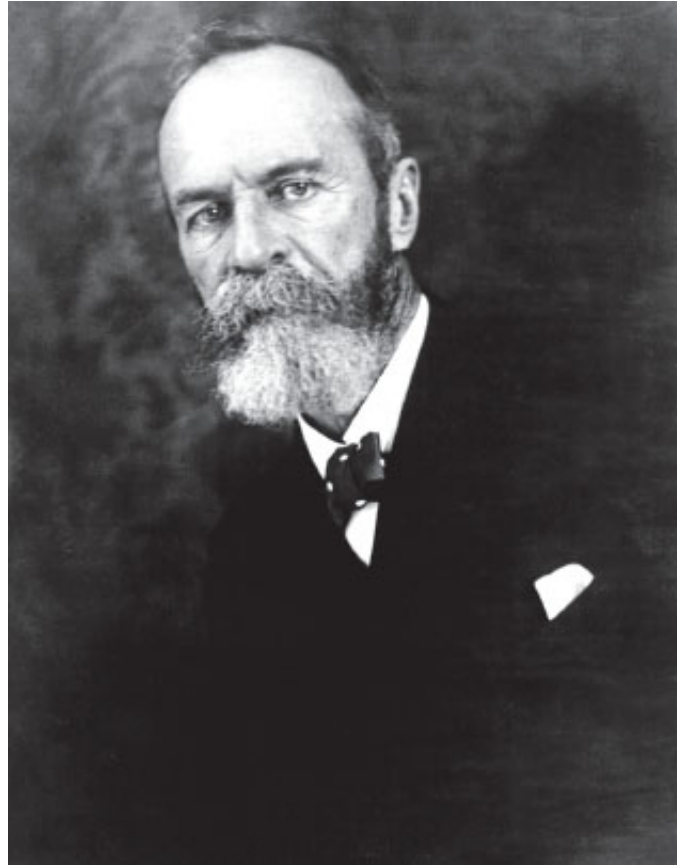
Peter L. Nelson

The question of consciousness is both philosophically and psychologically perplexing. Although consciousness is usually taken to be the a priori of all human experience and knowing, it remains the most elusive human function, defying both certain identification as to its place of origin as well as the nature of its defining substance, if any. Any discussion of altered states of consciousness (ASC) requires a preliminary attempt at delineating of a notion of consciousness.

Most of our attempts to find consciousness, or the source of our awareness, return us to the fundamental "I am," or to the seeming fact that my experiencing self is, apparently, at the center of my conscious experience and therefore I seem to know it (as it knows me) more fundamentally than I know or am capable of knowing anything else. In this view knowing and the known are linked in the very fabric of the act of awareness and the apprehension of what is known and, for human beings, consciousness appears to be the epistemic driver from which all ontological ascriptions derive their origins.

The heart of the problem in studying consciousness seems to be found in the supposed gap that is believed to exist between observer and observed. How can a thing, for example, exist out there in the objective world and also be in my inner experiential world simultaneously? Within science, dualism is not popular because of its implication that there are two parallel ontologies (at least), and science wants to see itself as embracing the whole of reality. David Bohm and a number of other physicists have taken a non-dual position and have developed various models that encompass mind and matter as derived from a single source giving no clear preferential status to either subject or object. Bohm's idea is expressed in his notion of a "Super Implicate Order" in which objective things and their subjective representations emerge as two sides of the same coin from a non-dual, underlying connectedness.

The philosopher John Searle is insistent that we cannot reduce the "subjective ontology" of conscious experience to the "objective ontology" of materialist science. He argues that any attempt to do so obviates



Portrait of late-19th-century philosopher William James. James was not only a pioneer in the study of psychology in the United States but also achieved international fame as a philosopher with his doctrine of pragmatism, a method for determining truth by testing the consequences of ideas. (Library of Congress)

the very essence, or *qualia*, of the subjective world, thereby leaving no consciousness to study. The position taken in this essay follows on from Searle's assertion and William James's *Radical Empiricism* by arguing that consciousness must be understood as being like a Kantian thing-in-itself and thus not directly knowable as either a subjective or an objective entity. The assumption of a directly apprehensible consciousness as objective neuro-process or as thing-in-itself existing per se is untenable just as it is for all objects of the world. Such objectified inferences are better understood as derived from human experiential knowing wherein some qualia are given objective ontological status while others are understood to be subjective depending on context and learning. From this perspective so-called objective knowledge becomes intersubjectivity that is mediated through the interpretive experiential frame of language, culture, and other learned signs. This, in effect, was the insightful position taken by James in *Radical Empiricism*, his final statement about consciousness, published around the time of his death in 1910.

For mystics and scientists alike, reality is experiential—the difference between their conceptions is the assignment of ontological status. Both within the scientific, empirical/materialist positions and mystical/ phenomenological views there are no clear-cut agreements on the assignment of ontological status. In general, however, the scientific position is that the ultimate ground is an objective, existent material reality with an ontological status not dependent on consciousness, and for the mystic it is an inner, revealed truth or ontological principle grounded in a transcendental entity and/or consciousness. In the case of the former, consciousness is merely the place where the real world is reflected in neuropsychological processes in order to be known by the observer, but for the latter it can

also be the experiential ground of being or reality itself.

In his attempt to resolve this dualism, James argues that "there is only one primal stuff or material in the world, a stuff of which everything is composed, and if we call that stuff 'pure experience,' then knowing can easily be explained as a particular sort of relation towards one another into which portions of pure experience may enter . . . The instant field of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience. It is only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. For the time being, it is plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*. In this naïve immediacy it is of course valid; it is there, we act upon it; and the doubling of it in retrospection into a state of mind and a reality intended thereby, is just one of the acts" (James, *Essays*, 23–24).

This seems to be an attempt by James to remove not only Cartesian duality, but any final Kantian thing-in-itself as referent for the experience of objective things or subjective states. Sartre, however, in his classic critique of Husserl's requirement of a "transcendental I" (the phenomenologist's thing-in-itself) as being necessary to achieve the *epochè*, follows a related line of reasoning when he suggests that intentionality is

81

82

consciousness itself. In arguing this position, he is declaring consciousness to be a "backward cast shadow" of the contiguity of remembered reflected awarenesses experienced as part of self-reflection in the present. Although James seems to put all things, states, and knowledge on the side of experience, Sartre puts them back out onto the object. In either case both positions point us to the unique reality-making quality of intentional conscious experience and appear to suggest that it is here that we should focus our attention in any systematic and scientific exploration of consciousness.

Most of us are aware that there is not just a single, ongoing, homogeneous state of consciousness, sleep being the one most common example of an altered state. Drug-induced experiences, ritually created trance states, the altered awareness induced during prayer and meditation, and spontaneous religio-mystical encounters represent the more exotic end of the spectrum of ASCs known to us, in addition to the more negatively valenced states experienced by individuals undergoing psychotic episodes. Some theorists, including myself, believe that the state of consciousness of the knower is the single most important factor in determining how ontological ascriptions are made and hence what is considered to be real (Nelson 1990).

In the conceptual hands of many scholars and scientists, consciousness is considered to be a thing but yet seems impossible to define without reference to something else. This something else (namely, brain, cosmos, etc.) usually turns out to be, on close inspection, a linguistic metaphor or conceptual analogue. Our language not only derives its implicit epistemic frame from our commonsense notions of time, space, and objects, but language also implicitly feeds these notions back to us through the structuring of our perceptions of the world.

Consciousness, rather than being a place or thing, would appear more likely to be a conglomerate of functions or operations and is thus apparently definable more by reference to its states, manifest behaviors, experiential contents, and forms of awareness than by reference to place or things.

To summarize thus far, it is being argued that consciousness, and its objects, are inferential entities derived from the retrospection we call knowing and, in essence, they gain their epistemological status from qualia alone, which must become the focus of any useful consciousness research. Any attempt to reduce or explain consciousness through objective

metaphors such as neurophysiological processing or quantum field effects at neural tubules is, in a naive-real sense, attempting to study an object that is being unnecessarily posited. There is little doubt that the explicate metaphor of brain has much to do with the related, but not identical, explication we call consciousness. However, it is usually considered a commission of a category error to superimpose or interchange these metaphoric constructions and, further, naive to fail to recognize that both arise, in the sense of James's radical empiricism, from a human experiential source and only from that source. Thus, the study of consciousness requires that we heed the call of the phenomenological investigators of the first part of the 20th century and return to experience itself.

In order to study ASCs we must start with a consideration of the deployment of attention (and attentional resources) as being the sine qua non of experience's constructional operations. Looking further into this process, it is apparent that the deployment of awareness can be conceived of as generating, in an operational sense, the sum total of experience in the present and itself is set by the degree of self-reflection operating as part of that deployment. Further analysis reveals that the focus and intentional quality of deployment emerges as the result of other operations whose functioning determines the degree of self-reflection occurring at any given moment. In this analysis reality can be understood as a continuous stream of explications unfolding as qualities of conscious awareness generated by the nature and degree of awareness deployment and related self-reflection. The experience of any world is understood herein as an operationally generated metaphoric constellation of concepts working in much the same way as the operations of using a ruler define the concept and hence the knowledge of metric length.

This operational model of consciousness as a self-reflexive "backward cast shadow" is illustrated in Figure 1. From the upper horizontal section of this diagram it can be seen that consciousness is an inferential construct created by intending the contiguity of previous experiential presents (two instances of which

82

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83

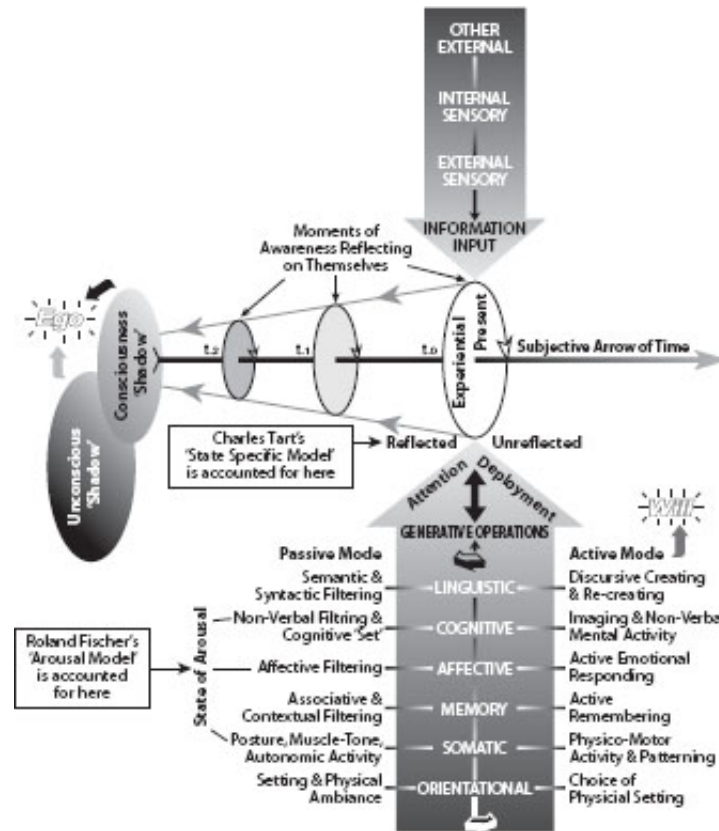


Figure 1 are shown at t-1 and t-2) into an ongoing process that gives the experient the sense that there is a container whose existence is greater than the current moment alone and encloses the objects and reflects the states associated with this collocation of past moments. The current moment is represented by the least shaded oval and the arrow on this oval is intended to denote that the experiential moment is at least partially reflected most of the time, although it is possible that there are moments of awareness that can be totally unreflected. The large, shaded vertical arrows represent, from above, potential sources of informational input into the current moment and, from below, the operations (functions) that determine deployment and quality of attentional resources and thus the ratio of reflected to unreflected experience and thus state of consciousness. The operational functions that determine state of consciousness and, hence, experiential reality are summarized in Table 1. The fundamental maneuver of the deployment of attention (and hence state of consciousness) is inextricably connected to the process of

**Table 1**

1. ORIENTATIONAL (Place)—Choice of location and/or creation of explicate self/other forms, in its active mode, and contextual filtering and state maintenance, in its passive mode. Attention is 'directed' by 'significance' and 'meaning' of surrounding forms, ambiance and circumstance (also includes social and cultural shaping and filtering).
  2. SOMATIC (Sensory/Motor Operations)—Sensory-motor patterning of 'physical' self and thus active forming of relationship to, and maintenance of the explicate forms of 'self' and 'other' (subject-object dialectic). In the passive form it is the bodily filter determining 'body image' by maintaining self-recreating parameters.
- MEMORY—This may be the re-enfolding (Bohm 1980) of 'habit patterns' (Sheldrake 1981) into the 'implicate order,' or the unfolding into the 'explicate' in its active form. The associative aspects connect 'habits' in the manner of a holographic recording with a

3. probabilistic relational matrix describing the web of connectedness. In the passive form, this re-determines the state of the system with each emergence of a standard operational configuration. In the active form, this matrix is activated from the 'top' as it were.

- AFFECTIVE (Affect and Arousal)—In its passive form, it gives 'meaning' and 'reactive' quality to the totality of a given experiential event and, in its active form, it determines what events are 'felt' to be possible. Although affect is generally regarded as a 'by-product' reaction to events for human beings, it is taken here to be like the color we give to a picture and our way of framing it to include and exclude events and things, as well as to determine figure-ground relationships and what 'picture' we choose. Part of this operational system is always active in awareness, but much of it is operative outside of the range of reflective capacity and is in this sense 'unconscious.'
- 4.

- COGNITIVE (Conscious Processing)—These are the range of behaviors we label as thinking, remembering, visualizing, conscious attention, etc., in the active mode, and as cognitive 'set,' and overall structure of thought patterning in the passive mode. The experience of 'will' seems most associated with this group of activities, but it is impossible to tell which comes first. 'Will' may be a 'shadow' effect of the active mode like Sartre's transcendental 'ego.' It is with these operations that we associate our choice of *active deployment of attention*. Choice, however, may be an illusion caused by the assignment of initiation of an event to 'self,' but this 'self' is still an operational by-product, determined by the state of the overall system. In either case, we can differentiate an active, as well as a passive deployment of attention.
- 5.

- LINGUISTIC (Language and Verbal Operations)—Discursive 'internal dialogue' and external linguistic communication continually re-create the explicate metaphorical forms that constitute the 'picture' of reality. This is the active intra- and interpersonal filtering of experience into culturally- and personally-bound explicate forms (self-cuing). In its passive form, language structure, as an operational connecting grid, filters everything through the shape of syntactic and semantic schema.
- 6.

83

84

conscious awareness reflecting itself. The conglomerate of bodily, emotive, and cognitive operations underlying deployment of attention determines on which aspect, state, or function of consciousness-doings awareness (as experience) intends reflectively. Reflection, and hence deployment of attention, can be passive, as in the sense of a filter whose capacity and form are set as ongoing background states or activities, or it can be active, as in the sense of focused concentration and participation of the experient in consciously manipulating and changing those functions.

In its passive mode, reflection occurs because a system capable of reflective consciousness is itself always at least partially reflected. This state is what defines existence and is the operational explicate metaphor we refer to as our mind-body complex. In its active mode, reflection is seemingly directed by the state of the system and the feedback generated by the background reflexive activity. Underlying the passive mode are a number of sub-operations, which include the perceptual filtering system determined by language semantics and syntax; physico-motor stance or posture (this includes in what place one puts oneself); sensory set

and attunement (which varies from modality to modality); and memory, which is activated according to the information flow through the entire experiential matrix. Although we are referring to reflection as being passive here, we recognize that its ongoing activity is implicit to and part of the entire set of the system.

In its active mode, reflexive conscious experience is similar, but it gives the impression of emanating from some source such as a will. Although this will seems, experientially, to be an active agent coming from an active self, it is a projected shadow of the doing of the active mode of reflection. In other words, there is no existent will or doer behind the activity, only the doing in a mode that gives the impression, as part of its cognitive form and involvement, that it emanates from a source beyond itself. In this active mode, language, through the inner discursive dialogue, becomes a labeling and unfolding activity that creates and maintains the explicate form and is directly involved in those activities that generate the sense of will. This active attention mode also determines what aspect, or aspects, of sense experience one emphasizes or attends to.

Since the stability of a particular state of consciousness (SoC) is dependent on the dominance of a given constellation of reflective/deployment operations, then, for example, if discursive internal dialogue is de-emphasized, the whole system will tend to seek a new steady-state. In fact, the interconnectedness of all the operations, as depicted in Figure 1, when disturbed in any aspect, will tend to cause a shift and reassembly of the whole dynamical system. Because of the stochastic nature of this entire implicate/explicate functioning, this occurs in such a manner that the functional form of the re-assembly into any given new stable state is not entirely predictable. This change, as in Tart's model of states of consciousness, Fischer's arousal concept, and Katz's cognitive/affective re-interpretation, causes a shift in overall arousal and hence the perceived intensity and quality of events thus leading to an altered state of consciousness experience.

Probably the most written about and intense ASC experienced is the classical mystical encounter. In my retrospective study of individuals' recalled experiences, the rearranging of the constellation of driving operations appears to cause a very significant alteration in their functional relationships that leads to profound alterations in perception and knowing. It is this epistemic reframing that then leads to the remaking of ontological ascriptions and a sense that one has seen past the veil and penetrated to the core of existence.

I would argue that it is this apparent ontic shift that generates in our knowing a sense of having penetrated to a deeper level of reality. There is no doubt that the experient finds this encounter to be profoundly moving, because of the revelatory quality of revised knowing and, as a result of this feeling of having penetrated beyond the usual reality, this experience is often followed by a re-evaluation of values, relationships, behavior, and lifestyle. William James's report of George Fox's vision and revelation while crossing a field on his way to Litchfield is a wonderful example of the alteration in the way of knowing (and what is therefore perceived and known) that contributed to Fox's capacity to see the world anew and thereby to bring the force of his revelation into the founding and development of the Quakers. I would argue that it is particularly those types of ASCs in which the constellation of operations is altered sufficiently to give the

84

85

sense that one is seeing a new level of reality, or that one is being cast across an ontic divide, that create the most intense impact and thus often lead to a reframing of meaning and value that is religious in character.

Although the term "altered state of consciousness" was most often associated with drug-induced experiences in the recent past, there is little doubt that these changes in conscious functioning have contributed profoundly to the creative unfoldment of human individual life and culture. Mainstream science's refusal to deal with this topic as anything more than categorizations, such as anomalous experience and psychopathology, has been a sad omission in our attempts to understand the universe and its origins in our collective knowing.

See also:

[Fox, George](#); [Friends/Quakers](#); [Western Esoteric Tradition](#).

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