

Introducing the 9th Issue

U. Mohrhoff

How does consciousness arise in matter? While much ink (and toner) has been more or less unproductively spent on attempts to answer this question, rarely (if ever) has it been addressed in its *proper context*, as a question about the *natural history* of consciousness. Most of the time (if not always) the physics, chemistry, or neuroscience deemed relevant is taken for granted, and the question that is *actually* addressed is: how does consciousness arise *ahistorically* from the material matrix described by these sciences. In her outstanding essay “Consciousness: A Natural History,” **Maxine Sheets-Johnstone** presents reasons for thinking the question in this ahistorical form spurious; genuine understanding of consciousness demands close and serious study of evolution as a *history* of animate form. She pours well-deserved scorn on D.C. Dennett, who is loath to find consciousness in any creature that does not speak and therefore lacks a “center of narrative gravity.” (His answer to the question of whether deaf-mutes are conscious: “Of course they are — but let’s not jump to extravagant conclusions about their consciousness, out of misguided sympathy.”) The question Dennett does not ask himself is how human language itself arose.

Clearly, he *should* ask the question. Indeed, he should ask not only how human language could even have been conceived short of an already existing consciousness but how human language in the beginning could even have been standardized short of already intact consciousnesses. Dennett does not seem remotely aware of such questions, much less aware of their needing answers — which is why only linguistic creationism can explain a Dennettian consciousness.

Neither by championing a metaphysical theory that shackles inquiry before it even begins, nor by giving inadequate definitions of life, nor by privileging human brains, nor by explaining consciousness in narrative terms, do we arrive at an elucidation of consciousness as a dimension of the *animate*. “Until such an elucidation is given, a viable answer to the question of ‘how mind got there in the first place’ will be consistently baffled,” Sheets-Johnstone maintains.

Cognitive capacities cannot reasonably be reserved only for what are commonly termed “higher-order” organisms. Cognitive capacities are in evidence from a bacterium’s behaviour all the way up the evolutionary ladder. They are even referred to in cognitive terms, but within quotes — up to the point (which varies with the author) at which the quotes unaccountably disappear: “a conceptually lazy, inapt, and/or obfuscating textual practice.”

Cognitivists like Dennett write as if proprioception and kinesthesia did not exist. (Proprioception refers generally to a sense of movement and position. Kinesthesia refers specifically to a sense of movement through muscular effort.) Small wonder,

then, that they are clueless about how consciousness arose historically. According to Sheets-Johnstone's sensory-kinetic analysis of consciousness, the origin of consciousness is "coincident with the evolution of animate forms." Animate form itself is "the generative source of consciousness." Proprioception is life's "epistemological gateway": "what is being sensed in the case of an internally-mediated corporeal consciousness has the possibility of opening up, of expanding into a richly variable and complex domain of awarenesses"; it "shows itself to have the possibility of expanding into a sense of self."

To those acquainted with Sri Aurobindo's conceptions of consciousness, life, and evolution (see "Beyond Natural Selection and Intelligent Design" in *AntiMatters* Vol. 2 No. 2 ♠), these ideas will sound familiar. They also resonate with Gebser's insights into the evolution of consciousness (see "Evolution of Consciousness according to Jean Gebser" in *AntiMatters* Vol. 2 No. 3 ♠), according to which matter, rather than being life's matrix, is an aspect of the world that only exists *for* a particular species (ours) and *for* a particular stage in the evolution of its consciousness.

In the second contribution to this issue **Stephan A. Schwartz** reports on an applied remote viewing experiment, in which two remote viewers were asked to locate, first the now buried city of Marea (some 44 km southwest of Alexandria), then a buried building within the city, and finally to describe what would be found within the building site selected. Whereas electronic and geographical surveys — satellite imagery, magnetometers, and topography — had been completely unproductive at this site, the Remote Viewers were able to locate a building, including staking out its door and corners, as well as providing a wealth of reconstructive and descriptive material about what would be found.

The third contribution is Submission No. 00038, by **Joe Waldron**, to The Archives of Scientists' Transcendent Experiences, or **TASTE** ♠, an online journal devoted to transcendent experiences that scientists have reported. Maintained by **Charles Tart**, TASTE allows scientists to express such experiences in a psychologically and professionally safe space.

Four remarkable books are reviewed next, in considerable detail.

In my estimation, *The Two Sides of Being: A Reassessment of Psycho-Physical Dualism* by **Uwe Meixner** is one of the most important works coming out of academic philosophy for quite some time. In fact, offhand I can't think of a worthy competitor, while I could rattle off a list of candidates for the silliest recent publication in philosophy. That list would be headed by some title by Dennett, to whose inanities Meixner pays far more attention than they deserve — but then he is writing for an audience that pays them far more attention than they deserve. Psycho-physical dualism may not be the last word in ontology, but if there is a last word, the surest route to it is likely to pass through a dualistic theory of consciousness such as that set forth by Meixner in *The Two Sides of Being*. (One needs to discover both the ultimate subject and the ultimate object — the former by deep introspection and/or mystical experience, the latter by following the physical evidence — before one is in a position to recognize their original identity and arrive at a genuine, i.e., non-reductive, monism.)

In *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, **John Hick** examines the soundness and cogency of the naturalistic world view and finds it sorely wanting. What are the alternatives? Epistemologists, we are told, distinguish three main positions concerning the relation between our conscious experience of the world and the world of which we are conscious: (i) naïve realism, (ii) “the ‘idealism’ which holds that the perceived world exists only in our consciousness, or rather in *my* consciousness since the other people with whom I interact are also part of my perceived world”; (iii) critical realism, presently the default position in cognitive psychology and the sociology of knowledge. By his caricature of idealism, which ought to be called *naïve* idealism, Hick deprives himself of the most promising position, which could be called *critical* idealism. Whereas a critical idealism would hold that the world exists only in consciousness, it would not identify the consciousness in which the world exists with our (present) consciousness or with *my* (present) consciousness.

If the critical realist is at liberty to hold that a multitude of conscious selves has emerged in a world that existed initially (and continues to exist intrinsically) out of relation to consciousness, the critical idealist is at liberty to hold that a multitude of selves has emerged from a single self, by a multiple localization of this single self within the content of its consciousness. The difference between the two positions is that while the critical realist’s postulate of a world existing initially and intrinsically out of relation to consciousness is not verifiable by any kind of experience, the critical idealist’s postulate of a world existing initially and intrinsically for a single conscious self (or in the consciousness of a single self) is verifiable by mystical experience. Many of Hick’s valuable insights actually make better sense in the context of a critical idealism than they do in the context of his critical realism, in particular his embracing reincarnation as essential to understanding the meaning of existence or life.

What we should take from Hinduism and Buddhism, I suggest, is the thought that in the unconscious depth of the present personality there is a deeper moral/spiritual essence which can survive bodily death and be re-embodied in a new conscious personality – or indeed in a series of new conscious personalities.... This option permits the cosmic optimism that through a series of lives, in which any moral/spiritual maturing achieved in one is carried forward to the next, human existence may eventually be perfected.... [T]he meaning or significance of what we do now is largely determined by what comes out of it in the future. We can project this principle onto a much larger scale in which a present human life receives its ultimate meaning from the future lives to which it leads, and the ultimate future to which they all lead. There are, to use visual imagery, widening circles of meaning, from the often intense immediate meaning inherent in each present moment of experience, to that same moment as it takes its place in the larger context of a further, say, fifteen years of living, to the further, sometimes different, meaning that it takes on after another period of years, and so on as our life develops, to its meaning far beyond this life in the light of the all-encompassing ultimate future.... Our present lives thus have profound meaning, contributing something positive or negative, by advancing or retarding the succession of future selves who will continue the same spiritual project, eventually to its completion.

In *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, **John F. Haught** heaps scorn on the “soft” or “sunny” naturalists (some of whom even consider themselves “religious” naturalists) for their gross insincerity. “Trust me,” Owen Flanagan writes, “you can’t get more. But what you can get, if you live well, is enough. Don’t be greedy. Enough is enough.” Haught’s response to such nonsense is remarkably restrained:

[Naturalists] ought frankly to acknowledge that if they are right the human situation is irredeemably bleak and painful for vast numbers of people. For — if they are right — in the case of that innumerable multitude whose quality of life has been rendered predominantly negative by pain, anxiety, extreme deprivation, oppression, or whose lives have been cut off in childhood or youth, there is no chance of ever participating in an eventual fulfillment of the human potential.

While in these postmodern times it is a truism that “the world is not experienced, at least in a rich or interesting way, apart from stories,” the naturalist’s party line still is that most of our stories, especially religious ones, as nothing more than human fabrications superimposed on the senseless substratum of physical reality first fully exposed by science.

However, close examination will show that the naturalistic dismissal of the cognitive (as distinct from emotive) function of story, a denial that undergirds much contemporary academic life, is itself borne aloft on the wings of a firmly established cultural narrative of its own. It is empowered by the myth that trustworthy consciousness came into the world only with the birth of objectifying scientific method during the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries. It is a story laced with abundant accounts of heroic explorers and their own struggles toward the light. All over the world initiates to objectifying consciousness imbibe the myth of science’s ascent and its exalted ethic of knowledge. Nothing provides clearer evidence of the inescapability of story than the modern attempts to escape it.

According to David Sloan Wilson, “[r]ationality is not the gold standard against which all other forms of thought are to be judged. Adaptation is the gold standard against which rationality must be judged, along with all other forms of thought.” This makes Haught wonder “if Wilson is aware of how thoroughly his subordination of rationality to evolutionary adaptation logically undermines not only his claim but also the confidence with which his own mind makes such a claim.” Thus apart from being insincere, naturalists are also inconsistent.

Haught’s counterproposal makes decidedly more sense:

Emergence at all levels of being, and not just at those of life and mind, requires that nature possess an anticipatory rather than simply a cumulative character. It must be open to a domain of potentiality that makes a quiet entrance — from the future as it were — and thus opens up the otherwise unbending fabric of things to the later-and-more.... I propose that the ultimate basis for our trusting the desire to know and the mind’s imperatives can be found only in the mind’s native anticipation of a transcending fullness of truth that has already grasped hold of us but which also escapes our grasp. Only if our minds already anticipate, and allow themselves to be carried away by, an infinite horizon of being and truth ... do we have any plausible reason for trusting our critical intelligence to take us deeper and deeper into the real.

Haught’s reflections on morality are equally commendable:

moral aspiration comes to life most enthusiastically when there is a sense that human action can contribute something new and unique to the universe.... For pre-conventional morality God is the upholder of taboos. For conventional morality God is the sanctifier of the status quo. But for post-conventional morality God is the vaguely anticipated mystery of goodness that calls us to transcend the conventional and pre-conventional levels of morality. It goes without saying that the most innovative figures in the history of ethics and religion have been decidedly post-conventional, their ideals contested especially by the more conventional types. It is also evident that religious and ethical traditions that are originally built on the ideals of a great prophetic figure can often decay into conventional or even pre-conventional spin-offs.

In *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together*, **Charles T. Tart** looks at research findings “about most major parapsychological phenomena and some less-researched but farther-out phenomena” and finds that “the implications of the most rigorous kind of research in scientific parapsychology show that we humans have qualities that open to a reality of the spiritual.” Tart wrote this book “to help those who’ve experienced conflicts between their spiritual and scientific sides” — to show them that “we can be both scientific and spiritual, and not have to artificially separate the two.” There’s a problem, though. While “science can be practiced in a way that makes it an open-ended, personal-growth system for the practitioner,” it is also “one of the most effective and prestigious neurotic defense mechanisms available.” As Abraham Maslow put it in *The Psychology of Science*:

Science ... can be a defense. It can be primarily a safety philosophy, a security system, a complicated way of avoiding anxiety and upsetting problems. In the extreme instance it can be a way of avoiding life, a kind of self-cloistering. It can become in the hands of some people, at least, a social institution with primarily defensive, conserving functions, ordering and stabilizing rather than discovering and renewing.

Tart believes in a self-correcting mechanism built into science, admitting, however, that a self-correction can take “dozens or hundreds of years — when implicit, deep-seated attitudes affect the thinking and work of most scientists, as they often do.” If science’s self-correcting mechanism is that sluggish, we might well reach the end of science before the necessary corrections take place. Once again Gebser comes to mind (see *AntiMatters* Vol. 2 No. 3 [↗](#)), who predicted that the rational, scientific manner of dealing with reality will be superseded by the evolution of a more direct, suprarational way of knowing. Tart’s faith in science’s self-correcting mechanism, moreover, seems to be belied by his own experience with the pseudoskeptical set. A case in point:

My grant application was turned down by a major scientific-funding organization. It was their practice to include the comments their anonymous referees had made in evaluating each submission. All the comments on mine were negative and, to my mind, prejudiced and shallow. Months later I met a prominent psychologist at a national convention, who asked me how my grant application had gone; he’d really liked the proposal. I had no idea he even knew I’d made such an application. It turned out that he’d been one of the referees and that his response had been enthusiastic but had disappeared from the reviews by the time they were sent me.

In his discussion of parapsychological research (including his own), Tart pays particular attention to the phenomenon of precognition but finds himself unable to come to

terms with it: "I find the idea of precognition, where the inherently unknowable future can sometimes be known, so incomprehensible that I just never think about precognition in a serious way." That's a pity, for a bit of serious thinking might have made him realize that concluding, as he does, from the existing evidence for precognition that we have no free will, is a *non sequitur*.

To put the existing evidence for precognition in the larger context of the relationship between consciousness and time, the first of the three book excerpts that follow is a chapter from *The Synthesis of Yoga* by **Sri Aurobindo** titled "Towards the Supramental Time Vision."

The second book excerpt is a chapter from *The Battle of the Books* titled "The Vanguard of the Super Neos." *The Battle of the Books* is Book II of the trilogy *Darwin and the Battle for 21st Century Mind* by **David Loye**, which will become available from online book sellers in November 2009.

This issue's final item is a chapter from *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* by **Stephen E. Braude** titled "Toward a Theory of PK." Every scientific inquiry rests on an implicit and complex network of presuppositions, both metaphysical and methodological. Rarely do these receive the attention they deserve. In this illuminating chapter Braude pays close attention to the implicit assumptions in various theories of PK, drawing from a more general critique (in large part his own) of theories of intentional processes, and concluding that the prospects are bleak "for any theory attempting to analyze the causal connections between (on the one hand) kinds of PK effects and (on the other) intentions, desires, etc. to produce those kinds of effects."

In fact, it appears that an entire theoretical tradition in parapsychology is deeply misguided. As a rule, parapsychologists have tended to analyze psi phenomena along lines familiar to the physical and biological sciences. They assume that observable psi phenomena have unobservable underlying structures and that the former are thoroughly analyzable in terms of the latter.... Perhaps the main reason for this widespread procedure is that most parapsychologists adopt a confused principle that has vitiated a great deal of research in the behavioral sciences. They assume that organic phenomena generally (including psychological states and behavior) are analyzable in ways appropriate to (most) purely impersonal, mechanical, or non-organic phenomena.

Most scientists assume that it is possible (at least in principle) to analyze every observable phenomenon in terms of underlying processes or mechanisms, admitting at the same time that such explanations cannot continue indefinitely: there is a scientific ground level, where the phenomena are *ultimate* or *primitive* in the sense that we can no longer profitably ask of them *how* they occur. Hence

wherever explanation by analysis finally stops, wherever these fundamental phenomena occur, it will always be on the level of the very small — for example, at the neurological, biochemical, atomic, or subatomic level, and never closer to the surface, at the observable level. For convenience, let us call this the *small-is-beautiful assumption*. But although it is *only* an assumption, and although anti-mechanists have deployed powerful arguments against it, scientists often treat it as if it were an empirically established fact.

Exactly the same point has been made by Meixner in *The Two Sides of Being* (see above):

none of physical reality's layers of size — the ultra-big, the very big, the big, the middle-sized, the small, the very small, the ultra-small — has a causal prerogative (or, indeed, any other ontological prerogative) over any other such layer.... *Why* should it have such a prerogative? Just because it is the layer of the ultra-small things? How can *ultra-smallness* constitute a causal prerogative? Come to think of it, it is a rather indefensible idea.

Braude, too, finds the idea indefensible: "To suppose that the physicist's questions are inherently deeper or more fundamental is simply to be taken in by a kind of professional chauvinism."

I suggest, then, that the quest for a unified micro-analysis of PK phenomena is misguided. It is misguided in the same way as attempts to frame mechanistic theories for more ordinary sorts of intentional processes (e.g., aggression, compassion, or communication). They all presuppose a deeply mistaken view of the nature of intentional states, or mental states generally. No matter how scientific they might appear when dressed up in some appropriately imposing technical vocabulary, underneath they remain only bad philosophy.... Moreover, quite apart from abstract arguments (of the sort given earlier) showing the futility of building behavioral or intentional theories from the bottom up, it seems as if the major attempts thus far have been conspicuous failures — enough so to suggest that history is offering a lesson to be learned. But relatively few seem to have noticed. The philosophical theories of language, perception, knowledge, and action that adopt the approach have been notoriously inadequate, as have been similarly structured scientific theories (e.g., memory-trace, learning, and generative linguistic theories, and cognitive or computational psychological theories generally). In fact, the latter are merely variants of the former, couched in a trendy and limited technical vocabulary. What history shows, I believe, is that in any discipline for which human beings and their activities provide the data, starting with "simple" cases tends to lead to simplistic and procrustean theoretical constructs into which the more interesting and illuminating cases never fit.

If the study of PK is to make any progress, it must reflect the fact that there is more than one way of being scientific — that is, of systematizing and generating predictions about a domain of phenomena. Regrettably, however, parapsychologists — like many scientists — display a slavish adherence to the methods and goals of physics and chemistry, as if those sciences achieved a preferred form of understanding or offered a preferred form of explanation.

Clearly, there is much to think about in this latest issue of *AntiMatters*. Happy reading!