

CONSCIOUSNESS PART 1

Introduction

One of the attractions of Ouspensky's own writings and of the System he taught was that they dealt with the subject of consciousness. This was at a time when, for many scientists and philosophers, the subject was untouchable because it was deemed to be unscientific, since it must necessarily rely on introspective observation, and this cannot be verified independently: no-one can know what anyone else is really experiencing. Attitudes have changed in the last 30 years, and if anything there is now too much work on consciousness and it is a bit of a muddle. But our tradition is to engage with relevant contemporary matters, so we have to make the effort.

Why learn about consciousness? Apart from its intrinsic and topical interest both of our teachings place the study and experiencing of different levels of consciousness as a central element, so it is necessary to be able to recognise what consciousness in its different guises really is. Also, there is a school of thought that says that the whole trick in enlightenment lies in realising something about the nature of consciousness, and there is a suspicion that what scientists and philosophers are now saying could have some important clues. Lastly, the concept of oneness, Advaita, implies that everything in the universe has a common element and that element is often stated to be consciousness. We need to understand what statements of this kind mean in practice.

To start with, we need to check that we are all talking about the same thing when we discuss consciousness, at least in the ordinary sense of the word. The neurologist Antonio Damasio goes through a check of this kind for the benefit of readers of his book *The Feeling of What Happens*. It is rather a long passage, but it brings out some important ideas (some of which interestingly he fails to recognise):

As you look at this page and see these words, whether you wish for it or not, automatically and relentlessly, you sense that *you* are doing reading. I am not doing it, nor is anyone else. You are. You sense that the objects you are perceiving now – the book, the room around you, the street outside the window – are being apprehended in your perspective, and that the thoughts formed in your mind are yours, not anyone else's. You also sense that you can act on the scene if you wish - stop reading, start reflecting, get up and take a walk. *Consciousness* is the umbrella term for the mental phenomena that permit the strange confection of you as observer or knower of the things observed, of you as owner of thoughts formed in your perspective, of you as potential agent on the scene. Consciousness is a part of your mental process rather than external to it. Individual perspective, individual ownership of thought, and individual agency are the critical riches that core consciousness contributes to the mental process now unfolding in your organism. The essence of core consciousness is the very thought of you – the very feeling of you – as an individual being involved in the process of knowing of your own existence and of the existence of others. Never mind, for the moment, that knowing and self, which are real mental entities, will turn out to be, biologically

speaking, perfectly real but quite different from what our intuitions might lead us to imagine.

You are reading this text and translating the meaning of its words in conceptual thought flow as you go along. The words and sentences on the page, which are the translation of my concepts, become translated in turn, in your mind, by nonverbal images. The collection of those images defines the concepts that were originally in my mind. But in parallel with perceiving the printed words and displaying the corresponding conceptual knowledge required to understand them, your mind also represents *you* doing the reading and the understanding, moment by moment. The full scope of your mind is not confined to images of what is being perceived externally or of what is recalled relative to what is perceived. It also includes you.

There are several elements to this task, which can be separated. First there is the sense-data, the material being read, just as words on the page. Then there is the attention being brought to bear, which is a sort of light being shone on the reading material. There is the translation, the interpretation of the words, what they mean, although we are not aware of this process – it is done for us by our minds. It is hopefully followed by understanding. Then there is the sense of being there, self-awareness, which Damasio calls ‘core consciousness’. He goes on to describe a higher kind of consciousness in which ‘the “you” is connected to the lived past and anticipated future that are part of your autobiographical record.’ On still higher levels of consciousness he is silent.

Parts of this task could be done by a computer (or as philosophers like to say, endearingly, by a ‘zombie’), but could a computer really have the ‘light’ in the same way that humans have it, or the sense of being there? Philosophers and artificial intelligence experts argue about this.

Advaita draws a distinction between what *it* calls consciousness and the sense of self. *Chitta* is consciousness and *Abhankar* is the sense of self. Although the present focus is on consciousness, it may be helpful to have a reminder of the Advaita structure of the mind or soul (*Antakharana*): As well as *Chitta* (consciousness and memory) and *Abhankar* (sense of self), there is *Buddhi*, the discriminating function and *Manas*, the machine function of the mind. One can perhaps recognise these four components when the mind is occupied in certain tasks: sometimes there is a feeling of happiness for no reason, pure self (*Abhankar*); at other times, when focussing hard on something, consciousness is the most important function (*Chitta*); sometimes the discriminating factor is uppermost, for example when trying to understand something (*Buddhi*); and sometimes the machine mind predominates, for example when learning something by rote (*Manas*).

It is often stated by philosophers that consciousness must have some object, but this is not the case in Advaita or in the System. Referring to functions such as reading, Ouspensky wrote that:

Functions can exist without consciousness, and consciousness can exist without functions. [*First Psychological Lecture*].

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Next week we will look at higher levels of consciousness using the System approach, and anyone who has a copy of the *Psychological Lectures* might like to prepare for this by considering what is meant by consciousness in the System.

During the week, please re-read the passage from Damasio and try to identify for yourself what the mind is doing. Is attention to the words a form of consciousness? Is the 'core consciousness' always there or does it fluctuate?

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As a group exercise, it would be very helpful if everyone could read at least one book about consciousness this term – no need to understand everything, just try to get the general drift and the main points. Then be prepared to present something about what you have read. Here is a list, though it is not exhaustive, and anything will do – try the Colet library or your local library or the internet:

The Tao of Physics. Fritjof Capra.

The Quantum Self. Danah Zohar.

The Self-Aware Universe. Amit Goswami.

The Emperor's New Mind. Roger Penrose.

Shadows of the Mind. Roger Penrose.

The Astonishing Hypothesis. Francis Crick.

The Feeling of What Happens. Antonio Damasio.

Zen and the Brain. James H Austin (selected chapters).

The Conscious Mind. David J Chalmers.

Consciousness Explained. Daniel C Dennett.

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