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Consciousness

An Overview

by Michael Freedman

CONSCIOUSNESS IS A SUBJECT THAT HAS been much debated by scholars and writers interested in unravelling the essential nature of human capacities.

The word *conscious*, a Latin compound that can be translated as "knowing things together," was first used in English early in the seventeenth century by Francis Bacon. Later in that century, John Locke defined *consciousness* as "the perception of what passes in a man's own mind."

Over the centuries following Locke, the word *consciousness* has been used in several different ways. Each of these uses enlarges our thinking about the concept but at the same time has led to a certain amount of confusion.

In the early nineteenth century, psychology was often defined as the science of consciousness. Consciousness included all the contents of awareness: sensations, mental images, thoughts, desires, emotions, wishes, and the like. It was thought of as a kind of "mental stuff," a peculiar substance, different from the material substance of which physical objects are composed.

Consciousness has also been used as an attribute, signifying the difference between lifeless, mindless stuff such as a brick and

an alive, alert human being. Consciousness also described the awake state of human beings or animals as contrasted with their asleep state, which was then called unconsciousness.

Levels of consciousness

Comparing the contents of awareness in the fully awake state with the contents of awareness in a drowsy, somnolent state, a change in quality was noted, which led to the idea of "levels of awareness" or "levels of consciousness."

William James (1890-1950) described consciousness as "a continuous stream, ever moving, never the same from moment to moment." In the early years of the 20th century, this continuous stream or flow of awareness seemed an important and legitimate subject for psychological study by introspection and experiment.

However, researchers found the study of consciousness and its elements surprisingly difficult. Reported results from various studies were contradictory. Besides, looking inward was not in tune with the spirit of the times.

The study of consciousness attacked

J.B. Watson (1913), the founder of behaviourism in the United States, proclaimed: "The time has come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness. Its sole task is the prediction and control of behaviour, and introspection has no place in its method."

Many psychologists followed Watson, abandoning the study of consciousness and the human mind along with it. From 1950 on,

Consciousness

consciousness was explained in terms of stimulus-response theory by behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner, who described all thinking processes as "covert human behaviours" to be treated in exactly the same way as observable, overt human behaviours.

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Meanwhile, in Vienna, Dr Sigmund Freud (1900-1938), was proclaiming the power of the unconscious. Freud thought that a major part of the stream of mental activity is unconscious. Selected portions of this stream enter conscious awareness when we are awake and also when we are asleep.

The writings of Freud and his successors, such as the Swiss analytical psychologist, C. G. Jung have been very persuasive. Today, many of us use the unconscious as an explanatory concept with the same degree of certainty and casualness with which members of another culture might use spirits and demons to explain thoughts or behaviour.

There is something very special about the human brain. Its relationship to culture, to consciousness, to language, to memory, uniquely distinguishes it from even the most highly developed brains of other animals.

It is beyond our comprehension how these subtle properties of the conscious self came to be associated with a material structure, the human brain, that owes its origin to the biological process of evolution. But we must acknowledge that it is through our brains that each of us can plan and carry out actions and so achieve expression in the world.

For example, I am able to express my ideas because my stream of thoughts can somehow or other activate neuronal changes in my brain that eventually result in all the complex movements that produce writing.

In recent decades, there has been widespread interest in the evidence that the two halves of the brain are not completely identical in structure or function, and in the study of changes in consciousness that can be induced

chemically. As well, there has been a general dissatisfaction with the focus of mainstream behaviourist psychology.

As a result, some psychologists, such as Robert Ornstein and Charles Tart propose new ways of studying and explaining consciousness.

The other side of the brain

Robert Ornstein's view of consciousness has been heavily influenced by the evidence that the two halves of the brain seem to function in somewhat different ways.

Ornstein's thesis is "that two major modes of consciousness exist in Man, the intellectual and its complement, the intuitive.

Contemporary science (and, indeed, much of Western culture) has predominantly emphasised the intellectual mode, and has filtered out rich sources of evidence: meditation, mysticism, non-ordinary reality, the influence of the body on the mind.

He has noted that we are not equipped to experience the world as it fully exists. The human eye sees only a very limited band of the entire electromagnetic spectrum. The human ear hears only a limited range of all the possible sound waves.

What we select from the available stimuli for the content of our consciousness at any particular moment is influenced in part by our own biological receiving mechanism, as well as by our momentary needs, and our whole past history, which includes the way in which Western culture has defined and structured reality to exclude the intuitive perceptual mode.

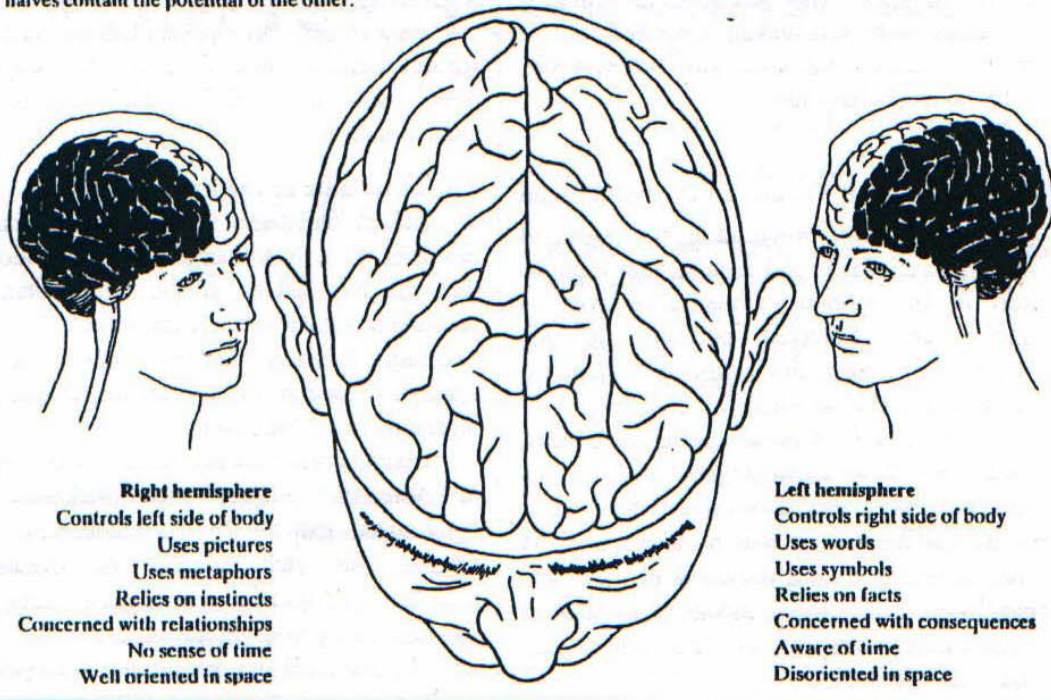
Ornstein believes that for a full, accurate description of consciousness and human capacities, we need more exploration of our non-verbal, intuitive side.

State-specific science

Charles Tart has pointed out that "experiences of ecstasy, mystical union, other dimensions, rapture, beauty, space-and-time transcendence, and transpersonal knowledge, all common in altered states of consciousness,

THE HUMAN BRAIN

The hemispheres are joined by a large nerve track called the *corpus callosum*. After the age of three, the hemispheres become highly specialized, although an infant with only one hemisphere can develop normally, so both halves contain the potential of the other.



are simply not treated adequately in conventional scientific approaches."

He proposes a "state-specific science" for the careful study of the different states of consciousness that result from hypnosis, meditation, and consciousness-modifying chemicals.

Essential to this method is that the scientist be trained to investigate a particular state of consciousness while he is himself experiencing it.

Tart advocates the development of a far more imaginative approach to the study of all aspects of consciousness, at the same time that we maintain the canons of scientific method. Consciousness, defined by Locke as "the perception of what passes in man's own mind," is recognised today as a multifaceted, multidimensional concept. There is no agreement about its boundaries or how it works or how to study it. The various interpretations of consciousness can be held in mind as

potentially fruitful hypotheses pending the accumulation of convincing evidence that supports one particular view.

For most of us, the images, thoughts, and feelings of consciousness are difficult to describe. They are complex and continually changing. Skilful artists, poets, filmmakers, painters, photographers, novelists, musicians, often capture and communicate vividly the unique contents of their awareness, but the average person usually finds it difficult to describe and communicate clearly their inner states.

Examining our own states

Dr Caryl Marsh has suggested a framework for the study of consciousness that any of us can use when we attempt to examine our own altered states of consciousness. The next article in this issue of *Magic Pentacle* is a shortened version of Dr Marsh's paper, which originally appeared in "Alternate States of Consciousness" [1977] ■



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FEW PEOPLE IN THE 1990s REALISE HOW recent are the phrases 'Altered States of Consciousness' and 'Alternate States of Consciousness', both often abbreviated to ASC. The first use of the terms 'Altered States of Consciousness' and ASC was in a 1966 paper by Arnold Ludwig, and in a 1969 book of the same name edited by the psychologist Charles Tart.

'Altered States' defined

Charles Tart defined an Altered State of Consciousness in the following way:

"For any individual, the normal state of consciousness is the one in which they spend the major part of their waking hours.

"An Altered State of Consciousness for an individual is one in which they clearly feel a qualitative shift in their pattern of mental functioning. They feel not just a quantitative shift (more or less alert, more or less visual imagery, sharper or duller, etc.), but also that some quality or qualities of his mental processes are different. Mental functions operate that do not operate at all ordinarily. Perceptions appear that have no normal counterparts, and so forth."

'Alternate States' defined

Norman Zinberg, a psychiatrist, says in the first paper in his collection papers on these topics, *Alternate States of Consciousness* [1977]: "In 1973, I objected to the word Altered because it suggests that these states represent a deviation from the way consciousness should be. I prefer the word Alternate, which makes it clear that different states of consciousness prevail at different times for different reasons and that no one state is considered standard. "

Both terms are used today and the abbreviation ASC stands for either.

The books edited by Tart and Zinberg collected together the major scientific papers on various states of human consciousness and not only gave names to the ASCs, but also set the pattern for the study and discussion of them.

Magic Pentacle is not a learned journal, but we do cover in this issue most of the various kinds of altered and alternate states of consciousness that are familiar to magicians and witches.