

Part Two

**The Enigma
of
Consciousness**

Chapter 8

Qualities of Consciousness

Consciousness (kon' shas • nis): The state of being aware of one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings, etc.

The word “consciousness” is customarily used in a rather narrow sense, applicable only to beings who are conscious of being conscious. “Conscious” usually means being alert rather than spaced out, awake rather than asleep. But even spaced out is a state of consciousness, and sleep can also be viewed as a state of consciousness. It is conscious beings who sleep, not rocks. In this and following chapters, I will distinguish between consciousness as a general state within living beings, and the consciousness of consciousness, which is a state of consciousness which occurs within humans and perhaps a few other species.

The nature of consciousness can be explored with all three of the approaches to truth outlined in Part One, but only the contemplative approach (the “I” approach) can inquire directly into the nature of consciousness. The scientific approach (the “It” approach) can correlate the reports and behaviors of conscious beings with objectively examined brain functioning. This is important work that calls our attention to the biological foundations of consciousness and explores how our inner experiences are biologically supported. I will be referring to these findings occasionally, but my main focus will be on what we can learn from our own contemplative inquiry within our own being.

The “We” approach to truth can also tell us things about the nature of consciousness. The social interactions of humans provide us wisdom about the enigma of consciousness not accessible with only the “It” or “I” approaches to truth. The dynamics of an intimate relationship and/or the dynamics of building a common society together can reveal things to us that neither the “I” approach or the “It” approach can show us.

Without denying the importance of the “We’ and “It” approaches to the truth of consciousness, I will be focusing in this and following chapters on the “I” approach – on contemplative inquiry into our own inner experience of consciousness. Each of us can experience ourselves as a human subject that is observing that very subjectivity within ourselves. We can even say that contemplative inquiry does not have an object of observation, because that object is the subject doing the observing. Nevertheless, when “I” am viewing the subjectivity of my own inner being, “I” am viewing something more vast than “me-the-observer” can ever finish observing. When observing our own consciousness, each of us faces an infinite well of mystery. Part of that mystery is the rather astonishing truth awareness that consciousness within a human being includes the capacity to be an observer of our own consciousness. Herein is one of the profound mysteries of our lives: *we can be conscious of our own consciousness*. So let us notice within our own consciousness some of the qualities we observe about that consciousness:

1. As we are already noticing, a first truth that a contemplative inquirer can notice is this capacity to be conscious of our own consciousness, a capacity that makes contemplative inquiry possible. I, the inquirer, can be conscious of my own consciousness and of my own capacity to inquire into the nature of that consciousness. Though this may seem an obvious thing to say, it is an important truth.

2. A second truth the contemplative inquirer can notice is that he or she cannot be

directly conscious of the consciousness that is within another conscious being. We can observe the behaviors of our dogs or cats or human companions, but we cannot directly experience the inner consciousness of those beings. With other human beings we can observe their behaviors and hear their reports about their inner consciousness, but we cannot be directly conscious of that other human's consciousness. Contemplative inquiry is a solitary enterprise. We can compare our findings with each other, but we must each find our verifications for these findings within in own solitary lives. We can make guesses, even very good guesses about what is going on in another person's consciousness, but the verifications for those guesses can only be found in that person's consciousness of his or her own consciousness. Furthermore, the guesses we make about another person's consciousness are based on our own experience of our own consciousness. The very language we use to make those guesses is defined (or needs to be defined) in terms of our own inward experiences.

3. A third truth that the contemplative inquirer can notice is that an accumulated wisdom about consciousness is possible. Indeed, such wisdom is about half of all that each human culture counts as its common wisdom. All of a culture's artistic collections are expressions of our contemplative accumulation of wisdom. By "artistic collections" I mean paintings, sculptures, music, dance, story, song, poetry, dramas, and more. Architecture is also an artistic form as well as the design of functional dwellings. Further, all of a culture's religious collections are the result of contemplative inquiry. Those who claim that their formulated religious wisdom dropped down from a supernatural realm are simply making up a story to fill a gap in their understanding of these deep matters. Religious wisdom is acquired through contemplative inquiry. Consciousness views its own inner life and then these conscious experiences of consciousness are expressed in analogies, myths, cryptic sayings, diagrams, parables, dogmas, creeds, rituals, icons, and the like. The truth test for a culture's artistic and religious wisdom is found, and only found, in the type of verifications that can be acquired by singular persons consciously inquiring into their own consciousness.

4. A fourth truth that the contemplative inquirer can notice is that consciousness is both passive and active. It is both paying attention and taking initiative. It is both attentionality and intentionality. For example, we can pay attention to water spilled on the kitchen cabinet, and we can take initiative in wiping it up before it drains down and injures the woodwork. Consciousness is both taking in various qualities of our surroundings and putting out responses within those surroundings. Consciousness is a reception of sensory inputs (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches) as well as bodily pains, pleasures, and emotions. And consciousness is also an active relationship to those inputs, and the initiation of bodily mobilization for movement, including speech, including the inner movements that we call "thinking."

5. A fifth truth that the contemplative inquirer can notice is close to point 4, but slightly different. Consciousness is a co-creative force along with other forces in the outcomes of history. There are other forces – aspects of my own body about which I am not conscious as well as the vast forces of the cosmos. Consciousness does not create the whole of reality, but consciousness does co-create along with these other forces the course of events. Take the very simply example of raising your arm. All sorts of electrical, chemical, and mechanical functions are involved, but consciousness can initiate this string of functions. I am not simply watching my arm move. I am an arm mover. Similarly, if I am batting a baseball, I am batting. The concentration of my consciousness makes me a better batter than if I am half asleep at the plate.

How do we know that this co-creation of events is true? We know because we

simultaneously notice the inner initiation and the simultaneous motion of our limbs. We are guessing this very plausible correlation between what our consciousness intends and what our outward body is doing. While it is true that our bodies do many things of which we are not conscious, when we are consciously initiating responses, our consciousness is making a difference in what our bodies do. We do not absolutely control the difference consciousness makes; nevertheless, the difference depends in part upon what our consciousness intends.

So let us look at the co-creative power of consciousness more closely. When we guess that there is a correlation between our inner intentions and our outward movements, we are using both the sensory-scientific approach to truth and the inner-contemplative approach to truth. And we are assuming that the two truths are part of the same overall Reality and that the simultaneous nature of these two verities is not just a coincidence, but a linkage. It seems that we have no ability to prove this linkage, but a lack of linkage seems to us farfetched. How inner intentions are linked to outward movements cannot be investigated by either the scientific approach to truth or the contemplative approach to truth. Why? Because the scientific approach to truth cannot directly view consciousness and the contemplative approach to truth cannot view anything outside the realm of consciousness. So neither approach is capable of viewing the link between the two. Yet we tend to be quite sure that there is a link even though that link is one of the most enigmatic aspects of both scientific research and contemplative inquiry. We can easily opt to be quite sure that both approaches to truth are approaches to the same Reality, and we can come to realize that our mental make-up is such that our reason is not capable of a rational understanding of how our inner intentions are linked with our outer movements. Consciousness and its linkages with the overall sensory-discovered world are enigmatic to human thinking.

6. A sixth truth that the contemplative inquirer can notice is that consciousness has a fragile or passing finite quality. We can go to sleep and be mostly unconscious. Even in our waking life we can be more conscious or less conscious. Something infinite would not be subject to the categories "more" and "less." Consciousness is a finite process, for it can be spoken of as more conscious or less conscious. Also, we can notice that consciousness requires physical modes of energy to maintain it. Being conscious is hard work. We need to eat food to sustain it. We need to rest up after being intensely conscious in order to be conscious again with full attention and intention. Consciousness is a finite process within our temporal lives and this is especially true of our consciousness of our consciousness. Much of our living is done without the participation of our conscious presence as a conscious intender. Our memory of the past has gaps in it where we were not consciously present. Our life went on without us, so to speak. Sometimes a person can have a night of drunkenness that he does not remember at all. Others report to him that he had a good time, but he apparently missed experiencing that good time. Perhaps seeing a movie for the second time can be surprising in this way, revealing that we were not vividly present for a great deal of that movie the first time through. Consciousness of consciousness is a fragile, temporal thing that is not always present or fully present.

7. A seventh truth that the contemplative inquirer can notice is that consciousness is only present in living beings. A rock is not conscious. It does not pay attention or take initiative. A mountain is not conscious. We sometimes ascribe consciousness to mountains and other "inanimate" objects, but when we do that we are defining "consciousness" in a way that makes the entire concept meaningless. We need to maintain our clarity. Calling a mountain "conscious" is an analogy or a projection created by a conscious human being. We also project the human quality of

consciousness upon the quite different consciousness within our animal friends. We recognize them as conscious because their behaviors signal to us something familiar in our own consciousness, but we err to assume that their consciousness is everything that our own consciousness is. Our consciousness of consciousness, including the contemplative inquiry I am describing in this chapter, does not happen in our animal friends. Dogs, cats, horses, chimpanzees, porpoises, whales, etc. are clearly conscious beings, but humans enjoy (or are inflicted with) a mode of consciousness that I am calling “the consciousness of consciousness.” Later, I will discuss in depth this human mode of consciousness and how it differs from the consciousness of other living beings.

Are All Living Beings Conscious?

This question pushes us to define “consciousness” more carefully and fully. Clearly, not all living beings are conscious of their consciousness as we human beings are, or at least can be. All mammalian life is certainly conscious if we define “consciousness” as using an inward intelligence to select appropriate behaviors. Whether or not dogs and cats and other mammals are conscious of being conscious we do not know directly. We have to speculate about that on the basis of their behaviors. Do our other than human mammal friends have feelings? Again, watching their behaviors leads us to say, “Yes, they do.” Clearly, pet dogs act lonely when their masters are missing. Cats require snuggle time. All mammals create bonds with their young. Are reptiles conscious? Apparently so, though they do not appear to possess the emotional sensitivities we intuit in mammals. Are reptiles conscious of their consciousness? Answering “No” to this question seems easier than answering “No” for mammals. Are single cell amoebas conscious? They seem to take in touch and taste sensations. They seem to have some way of filtering and finding “meanings” in those sensations. They design appropriate movements toward food, away from dangers, and other behaviors. Surely, this is some sort of consciousness. A rock does not pay attention or take initiative. Amoebas do. Are amoebas conscious of being conscious. The probability of this seems miniscule.

In whatever way we answer these questions about the other species of animal life, our observations of living animals supports the statement that at some point in the evolution of animal life, consciousness became conscious of being conscious. This mode of consciousness is clearly present in the human species. Or it can be. Perhaps some humans have fled this potential and become little more than a complicated rock or a machine-liked set of psychological habits that automatically play themselves out unconsciously. But however unconscious some humans may be, the species is clearly capable of being conscious of consciousness. And humans may not be the only species that has this capacity. There is evidence that consciousness of consciousness may have been present in the Neanderthal species and perhaps in still earlier big-brained, upright-walking primates. The Neanderthals buried their dead, apparently conducting some sort of funeral. This witnesses to a consciousness of consciousness. It is a plausible speculation that big-brained primates evolved these bigger brains to handle the consciousness of consciousness that was increasing in those species. Among currently living non-human mammalian species, it is doubtful that consciousness of consciousness is present. Some chimpanzees might be capable of such an awakening, but not without extensive effort from human beings. And I have doubts that even the most accomplished of these amazing animals, are conscious of being conscious. In a later section, I will explore why I believe it is possible for a non-human mammalian animal to be highly conscious and highly intelligent without being conscious of being conscious.

Is a tree conscious? Many plants can turn their leaves to face the sun and other adaptive behaviors. If consciousness is defined as sensitivity to environment and creative responses, then some form of consciousness can be attributed even to plants.

But this form of consciousness need not to be assumed to include every aspect of the consciousness found in animal life.

Is a single-celled animal conscious? As we have already noted, our microscopic companions give meanings to sensory inputs and initiate relevant responses. If such a capacity is our definition of consciousness, then at least some single-celled creatures are to some extent conscious. Are viruses conscious? Perhaps viruses are only biological scraps that require living cells for their replication. Perhaps they are simply products of the life processes of living cells rather than a form of aliveness that preceded cells in the evolutionary process of life. If so, viruses may not be conscious beings but only complex materials constructed by living cells.

In conclusion, it appears to my consciousness that there is consciousness within other-than-human species of life. We need to note that this view is not derived from direct experience; it is a guess derived from our observations of these living beings. It also seems highly probable to me that among existing species only humans have the ability to be conscious of consciousness, and can thus inquire into the nature of consciousness as we (author and reader) are doing in this book. It seems to me that our experiences living with our animal companions support the conclusion that many of the aspects of the consciousness that I experience within myself also exists in these other-than-human living beings. But not all.

It seems plausible if not obvious to me that as living forms become more complex, a more intense consciousness can be supported. I am guessing (theorizing) that consciousness is a basic process of nature that seeks to become more conscious. If so, then consciousness is one of the driving forces of evolution. Perhaps consciousness works to develop more complex organisms in order that an increased consciousness can be physically sustained.

Our biological life is clearly dependent upon mineral foundations, and our consciousness is clearly dependent upon biological foundations. But if we assume, as many do, that biological processes cause consciousness, we are assuming something far more complex than a pool-table-cause-and-effect process. Indeed, we know very little about how consciousness is related to its biological supports. We can make certain associations between brain processes and inner experiences, but the why and how that pertain to these associations seem unfathomable.

Let us consider the following assumption (not yet refuted) about the relationship between biology and consciousness. Let us assume that consciousness is one of the forces that condition the coming into being of the biological supports for that consciousness. Let us assume that it is inadequate to suppose that the biological supports are the only causal factor. It remains true that certain conditions of temperature, chemical availability, and so on must be present for consciousness to do its creations. Let us hold in our minds the possibility that the first living cell on planet Earth did not come into being simply because some accident of physics came to pass. Let us guess instead that the first living cell came into being when consciousness as a force in the cosmos found on this Earth conditions favorable for its operation.

This assumption makes "consciousness" and "aliveness" companion concepts. Joining the concepts of "consciousness" and "aliveness" redefines both concepts. The concept of "consciousness" is expanded downward to the simplest cells. And the concept of "aliveness" is further distinguished from the chemical, atomic, and subatomic processes of the "physical" cosmos. The other elemental processes of the cosmos can be defined as unconscious or "physical" or "inanimate."

Subatomic "particles" are very different from the solid billiard balls of hard substance, but their dynamic energy exchanges and transformations do not qualify them as living or conscious. To say that an electron makes choices is a stretch. The behavior of a single subatomic entity is unpredictable in a strictly mechanical way.

Indeed, contemporary physicists are reporting that the behaviors of these tiny entities require an explanation of chance or probability rather than cause. But chance is not choice. The behavior of these tiny entities has been named “quantum mechanics” rather than “quantum aliveness.” Their behaviors do not require choice as an explanation; their behaviors can be accurately predicted with probability numbers. The behaviors of a living cell cannot be so predicted.

So aliveness remains a quality that has not been and cannot be analyzed by the discipline of physics. Physics can examine the behaviors of biological molecules and bodies insofar as these entities are viewed in their pre-living or post-living aspects. But physics does not deal with consciousness or with life in its essence. And when biology is functioning as an empirical science, it also fails to deal with the essence of life. Aliveness is only known through the inner gaze of an alive being. To explore aliveness or consciousness we must employ contemplative inquiry. Empirical biology only studies behaviors and reports. The biologist assumes aliveness, and this alive biologist uses his or her own experience of aliveness to theorize about alive beings, but biology, as an empirical science, does not study aliveness directly. It only studies the behaviors and reports of alive beings.

Life and consciousness remain total enigmas within the scope of the scientific approach to truth. Yet life and consciousness is clearly part of the cosmos. What part? I will explore this question further with a closer look at the physical world and the evolution of life.