



Exploring Dark Corners - An invitation to psychotherapists

Claudia Nielsen

Looking into the dark corners of the popular, collective psyche, we find the subject of death and the paranormal occupying much space there! At Halloween for instance, people play out this darkness from the safety of 'having fun' as they dress up as witches, ghostly figures, skeletons and other fearful things, challenging, probably quite unconsciously, the grip these underlying fears has on them. The way we relate to both death and the paranormal is intimately connected with the mystery of consciousness.

My personal interest in consciousness motivated me to follow the profession of psychotherapy, and for over 20 years I have been learning from clients, what it is to be a human being other than myself. One of the themes frequently present in the therapy room either overtly or covertly, is the issue of death, which is often permeated by fear.

I am currently engaged in PhD research exploring how spiritually inclined therapists see their own mortality, and consequently how this impacts on their work with clients. I am hoping to make a contribution to the field of counselling and psychotherapy by exploring a widely held but currently actively dismissed perspective about the mystery that is death and, in the process, help to open further the discussion in this area, which continues to be marginalised. With this article I extend an invitation to UK accredited psychotherapists who would like to participate in my research. Details below.

In the mission statement of the SMN, we learn that its role is to "challenge the adequacy of scientific materialism as an exclusive basis for knowledge and values". This resonates with me at a deep level and was the main reason why, when I found the SMN some 25 years ago, it felt like 'coming home'. From a young age, I had a deep sense that there was more to reality than meets the eye.

The SMN was brought into being in 1973 because our founders felt that one important aspect of reality was being ignored at the time especially in science and medicine: spirituality. Another word for spirituality or the spiritual dimension in which we all partake, is consciousness.

For the purpose of this article, I want to concentrate on three of the many understandings of the word 'consciousness': personal consciousness, consciousness as the architecture of conscious experience and consciousness as the ground of our experience.

Personal consciousness is the consciousness of I AM, or the personal experience of living. Consciousness as the architecture of conscious experience refers to an understanding of the components, which facilitate the experience of personal consciousness. This tends to be the default perspective of the materialistic paradigm and is often extrapolated to explain the nature of consciousness. Scientists and philosophers such as F Crick, S. Blackmore, D. Chalmers and others use this meaning to indicate that

consciousness can be analysed, studied, understood. Daniel Dennett wrote a book which he entitled *Consciousness Explained* [1], indicating that consciousness *can* be explained! This approach, focuses on the brain, which we know empirically, is implicated in our personal experience of consciousness. Some scientists following this line of thought, go as far as to claim that the brain generates consciousness, and although the mechanism is not understood, their belief is that it will be so in due course. This is what Popper called 'promissory materialism' [2].

The other meaning of the word is consciousness as the ground of being, or the ground of our experience. Philosophers such as Leibniz, Goethe, Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead and others have explored this perspective. This is also the field in which many SMN members have published informative and seminal books. Within this bigger picture, our personal consciousness is our subjectivity, our first person experience, which takes place within the ground of experience itself. So consciousness is personal and also ground. When I say I AM, I am experiencing my personal consciousness against the background of all there is. I am therefore embodied consciousness, and if we name the ground, God, then I am manifesting God in my personal consciousness.

The philosophy of panpsychism, or in theological terms, pantheism proposes that all physical matter is a manifestation of God, therefore is conscious at various degrees of sophistication. Panentheism, goes further, suggesting that God is in the manifestation of everything and is also beyond that, beyond our understanding.

Our experience however of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, as expressed by Descartes, has put a spoke in the wheel of this understanding and has been at the bottom of much philosophical contention. In the April 2015 lecture of the London Group of the SMN, Prof Richard Silberstein bridged this divide by suggesting that matter and consciousness are two aspects of something more fundamental in the universe, in the same way as electricity and magnetism are components of the electromagnetic force. In addition, in the article by Dr. Rolf Frobose in the Winter 2015 issue of Network Review we read a similar proposition by Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Dürr, former head of the Max Planck Institute for Physics in Munich, who says that 'the duality of the smallest particles is not limited to the subatomic world, but instead is omnipresent'. In other words, body and soul are two aspects of the same thing.

This idea is not new and has been articulated amongst others, by Plato, Thales, Spinoza, William James, Jung and more recently by Thomas Nagel.

The field of consciousness has traditionally been the area explored through the lens of spirituality by religion. The mystical understanding of religious traditions East and West is that the 'isness' of God, is the same 'isness' of our own being. For instance, the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart [3] said "The eye with which I see God is the same with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye is one eye, one sight and one knowledge and one love" (p11) and the Sufi Al-Hallaj [4] stated "I am God" (p72) (for which he was killed for blasphemy). In the Advaita Vendanta school of Hindu thought, Atman (the individual soul) is Brahman (the universal soul) [5] and in the Tao Te Ching [6] we read that:

With an open mind, you will be openhearted.

Being openhearted you will act royally.

Being royal, you will attain the divine

Being divine you will be at one with the Tao

Being at one with the Tao is eternal

And though the body dies, the Tao will never pass away (p. 18)

In the current scientific paradigm, which advocates that the brain in some way or another generates consciousness, death of the physical body necessarily means the extinction of consciousness. Once the brain is physically dead, it stands to reason that consciousness will necessarily be blown out too.

There is however, an alternative to this mainstream view, i.e. the perspective that holds the brain as necessary for the manifestation of consciousness but not its source. This viewpoint has its exponents within the community of reputable scientists. For instance neurophysiologist, Sir John Eccles, edited a book, *The Brain and Conscious Experience*, [7] in which 22 of the contributors agreed that no materialist theory could account for the workings of the human brain. Further evidence comes from the research conducted by our president Peter Fenwick and by cardiologist Pim van Lommel, into the phenomenon of Near Death Experiences (NDEs). The findings indicate that people who have undergone this phenomenon describe similar experiences of being somewhere else experiencing profound peace and harmony, often seeing dead relatives. Peter has also researched 'end of life' phenomena and found consistency in the experiences at this time as well. These included visions by the dying person and by living relatives, indicating, here too, that these experiences seem to point to access to some kind of a different realm. Listening to what dreams communicate is also informative, as we learn from von Franz [8]:

All of the dreams of people who are facing death indicate that the unconscious, that is, our instinct world, prepares consciousness not for a definite end, but for a profound transformation and for a kind of continuation of the life process, which, however, is unimaginable to everyday consciousness. (p. 156)

With this in mind, I think it is reasonable to consider as possible, or indeed very likely, the idea of death as a portal into a conscious experience of a different reality.

As psychotherapists, we are expected to have worked on ourselves and to have examined our issues, including our own mortality, in order to be authentic in the therapy room. How we, as therapists, deal with those issues will be strongly influenced by what we believe. If we are aligned with the ideas of the extinction of consciousness, we will work with endings and coming to terms with not-being. If, on the other hand, we believe that conscious existence continues after physical death, a whole set of scenarios opens up. We can help our bereaved clients who are open to the idea to continue to nurture their relationship with someone who 'passed on' and

will think nothing of encouraging them to 'speak' to their loved ones. For those who are close to death, or suffer from death anxiety, we can help prepare them for the ongoing 'adventure' in a suitable way. Plus, we are likely to have a different attitude to paranormal experiences our clients may bring.

Although it is true that absolute certainty on the issue is not available until we come to experience it ourselves, our expectations of what happens after physical death is in fact of paramount importance to every one of us. In the profession of psychotherapy especially, since we are working with people's struggles, this issue, in my view, needs more attention.

For my research, I am looking for UK accredited psychotherapists aged 50 or over with at least 12 years experience in psychotherapy, counselling or clinical psychology, familiar with the concept of consciousness, and who may have had one or more spiritual/paranormal experiences in the course of their lives.

For further information, please contact me on Claudia@cnielsen.eu.

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