



# An Enquiry into the Primacy of Consciousness?

## A personal view, with an invitation to respond

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*Most articles in the SMN are written by an ‘expert’ or a ‘reporter’ providing either an intellectual viewpoint or factual information about, for example, an event that has taken place. There is little opportunity for wider discussion in which all participants are seen as equal, based on our shared experience of being human.*

*As long term members of the SMN, we believe that there is a huge amount of experience, learning and wisdom amongst the SMN membership that presently goes untapped.*

*The challenge is, how to enable a greater number of people to contribute actively to the development of ideas in ways that are dialogic and interactive.*

*In this paper, we are raising the question: “Is consciousness an epiphenomenon of the brain; or is consciousness primary, with matter being the emergent property?” However our main aim is not to give a definitive answer to this question; but to offer a personal view to which we invite responses; and in so doing, to discover whether we can create a spirit of collaborative enquiry in which participants seek to acknowledge and build positively on the contributions of others in a constructive way, which includes accounts of personal experiences, rather than engage in intellectual combat over differing belief systems.*

### **Introduction: Is consciousness primary?**

The Network Review covers many interesting topics. However for those interested in the sustainability and wellbeing of the planet and all who inhabit her, the question we believe is at the crux of everything is: “Is consciousness an epiphenomenon of the brain; or is consciousness primary, with matter being the emergent property?”

We are not for a moment suggesting we should accept this as a fact. However we are suggesting that we accept this as a hypothesis to be explored.

For too long, the idea that matter is primary, and consciousness is an emergent property of matter,

has been accepted as ‘fact’ which can be taken to be ‘true’, rather than be viewed as a hypothesis to be explored. Science has based all its activities on that assumed fact.

Who knows, that assumption may be true; but there is an increasing amount of evidence, particularly from quantum mechanics, but also from well-evidenced research into ‘spiritual’ issues such as near death experiences, to support the view that it is a flawed assumption. Ervin Laszlo, for example, in his most recent book, explores the idea that consciousness is continually present in the cosmos and can exist without connection to a living organism (Laszlo, 2014).



## Can we create a research methodology to test the hypothesis that consciousness is primary?

In the meantime, although some scientists are seriously investigating the idea that consciousness is primary (for example, Goswami, 2008), there has been no systematic, rigorous debate about what plan of action can be put in place to test out that hypothesis. There has been no widespread discussion about what research methodologies would be appropriate for testing such a hypothesis. Alan Wallace (2007, 2009) is a notable proponent of the view that consciousness is primary – but he is exploring it solely through introspection and meditation as a method. We are not critical of that; but we are suggesting that it is just one approach. There may be others, if we were sufficiently open to exploring what these might be.

I (Joan) experienced one such method in a co-operative inquiry group in which I was involved with a small group of people [based on John Heron's (1996) participative research methodology.]

## Are we prepared to question all our beliefs and assumptions?

Our contention is that the reason why more people are not prepared to think about the hypothesis that consciousness is primary, and investigate it as such, is that it would mean questioning all the beliefs and assumptions that have formed the basis of their formal and informal education; and that can feel very threatening and scary. It is one of the reasons why individuals resist change; they don't want to rock the foundations of the beliefs that provide them with security in an uncertain world.

Actually many 'spiritual' people have no problem with this hypothesis – but many accept it unquestioningly, without the need for 'evidence'. This of course is anathema to the scientist or to anyone who does not choose to accept anything unquestioningly.

However, in a world which is scarred with conflict and abuse of power, and in which most if not all people experience life as a struggle, is it worthwhile considering what might happen if we act 'as if' consciousness is primary, and see if a different kind of reality can be created?

We don't think that real change will happen if people just 'believe' that consciousness is primary. It is possible to hold that intellectual belief, but to behave in a way that reflects the materialist cultural beliefs in which we are all steeped. We think the consequences of living according to the worldview that consciousness is primary are potentially immense – individually and globally transformational when fully achieved – but we need to learn / research what it means to live in this way.

In our view, this will include going in as much as going out. We think it likely that neither inner nor outer is more important. The challenge may well be to learn how to integrate the two in ways that feel meaningful, and create (inner and outer) environments that allow all human beings to flourish.

## An invitation to engage in a collaborative enquiry

What research methodologies can we create to explore such a hypothesis? We do not have the answer to this question. We are suggesting that it is a question which might benefit from a collaborative enquiry, if we can find the means to do so. Would Network members like to engage in such an enquiry?

We would propose that any participant choosing to engage in such an enquiry would not be expected to accept any viewpoint unquestioningly. The aim would be to encourage a systematic and rigorous exploration; and to challenge conventional methods of research by learning to be 'methodologically inventive' when thinking about how to explore such a question.

If we were to engage fully in this enterprise, would we be prepared to question radically the basis of everything we have ever believed in? As we have already said, even the idea of doing that can feel scary. It is fear that we believe is the greatest block to engaging in the huge adventure of exploring the possibility that consciousness might be primary. Based on the evidence from our own limited experience, though, we would suggest that the benefits of facing that fear, and moving on through it, may enable us, individually and collaboratively, to learn how to create a much better world.

## Can and should we create a balance between inner and outer worlds?

Every human being lives in two different universes - the internal one that is unique to ourselves, and the external, which we co-habit. It seems to us that each is equally vast and complex. We each struggle and suffer, love and enjoy, in different degrees and for different reasons, with most of us not understanding ourselves, far less anyone else; but because of the ethos of 'privacy' and the encouragement to feel a sense of separateness, there is no social recognition of the desirability to learn about the internal through sharing with each other our different experiences. In our culture, the focus is all on the external, and how to observe, analyse and manipulate that.

Of course, if the materialist view presides, and the internal is just a derivative of that which can be observed and measured - e.g. neurons firing in the brain - then there is little value in paying attention to our internal worlds, because they happen by chance, and have no real meaning or substance.

However, if consciousness is primary, might we as a consequence of our enquiry discover a different balance between our internal universe and external universe? In so doing, might we find more of our essential humanity?

We would welcome responses to these questions and this personal view.

## References

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**Joan Walton** is currently enquiring into the question: "What knowledge do we need to create a world in which all human beings can flourish; and what research methodologies will enable us to generate that knowledge?" At York St John University and Liverpool Hope University, she is supervising part-time PhD students, who are interested in pursuing this question in relation to their own professional contexts.

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**Tim Houlding** is, by nature, a hands-on artisan. He studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, with further training in head and neck surgery, including neurosurgery. He holds a degree in physics and cherishes a strong interest in psychology and psychotherapy. He yearns to explore the evolution of our majestic universe and the transformational power of love.

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