



Consciousness: where do we go from here?

Andrew Bell

Here Andrew takes up the debate on the future of consciousness studies, drawing on our conferences, articles and editorials. I would welcome further reflections on this theme.

The April Mystics and Scientists conference which was supposed to be addressing the vexed problem of consciousness turned out to be a missed opportunity. One of the speakers did address the issue directly, but others seemed to get into difficulties and it was clear, after the final Open Forum on Sunday, that the reductionists still hold sway in this debate. Consciousness was palpably the elephant in the room, I suspect because those who have spent a lifetime in one or other of the scientific disciplines still regard it as the unwelcome guest and struggle to engage with it.

The words 'spirit' and 'consciousness' appear regularly in Network articles, correspondence, reports and reviews and editorials. Most writers appear reluctant to commit themselves to these terms other than in a vague and general sense with no more meaning attached than you might glean from a standard dictionary. This comes at a cost. Though a few writers do probe more deeply, the debate always reverts back to the superficial level, lacking the traction to move the enquiry forward in any meaningful sense.

One of the latest examples of this came with Max Payne's article on 'Science, Spirituality and Religion' in the Spring edition. Max acknowledges that the nature of consciousness is 'the key strategic question' and I am sure that is right. But by the end of the piece, it is not at all clear how far we have actually progressed with this central issue. In one section, he seems to place consciousness beyond mind when he refers to "some sort of 'horizontal' field into which human thought can move.." But in another section, he appears to be using 'consciousness' as if it were mind, as if it was all about the thinking processes. But is it? Is it a useful comparison to make or does it merely compound the problem? I think this question is an important one. In SMN, there is a huge amount of confusion in this area. Here is Bernard Carr in his editorial to the Winter edition of the Review:

"It is hard to avoid the impression that consciousness (*or more generally mind*) is a fundamental rather than an incidental feature of the universe.." Later, in the same piece, he introduces another ingredient: "It is also apparent in the *mind* and *spirit*.." but he does not go on to define what he means by 'spirit' or indeed what he means by 'mind' and we are left wondering whether he would link consciousness with mind in that context (which is what you would expect from his earlier statement) or whether he might be persuaded that its proper home is in the realm of spirit, or indeed whether he thinks it sits somewhere between the two. I like to think that he could be persuaded that mind (which may be seen as just another form of energy on a more subtle level) has some boundaries and if so, is capable of being reduced, to assist in understanding, to a working definition. This would enable us to explore how it sits in relation to brain and consciousness and indeed spirit.

Sooner or later, it will be necessary to be much more explicit about our use of terms if this debate is to move forward, as we hope it will. The scientific community and others who care for science and its development as an inclusive discipline, need to hear a clear message about these issues, one which is both convincing and well argued.

My own view, for what it is worth (and I speak as someone with a legal and therefore non-scientific background, but with many years experience of teaching and engaging with spiritual issues) is that it will be difficult for the scientific community to make any real progress in this area without acknowledging that consciousness, mind and brain are separate; I mean discrete principles, quite different manifestations of energy with quite different functions, though, of course, all three are inextricably connected. Actually, this much was evident from what (Father) Lawrence Freeman said in his talk at the April conference and from the excellent presentation on consciousness given later by Raymond Tallis. But they never actually said so; and so they left the whole issue of consciousness hanging in the air, before the veil descended to obscure it completely.

If we accept, let's say in purely scientific terms, that these three elements are quite different manifestations of energy, then it becomes easier to accept that consciousness is beyond mind, that, having the furthest reach as it were, and being of much subtler material, it is in fact causal to mind. There may be some research which already points to this conclusion. Whether or not this is the case I see no wrong in using it as a starting point. Empiricism is probably out of its depth in these subtler areas, but it is not the only approach to scientific and quasi-scientific problems. There are many contributors to the Network Review and many gifted scientists (and I think Einstein was one) who would have no difficulty in accepting that consciousness is a faculty of the human soul that gives us a state of awareness which in turn allows us to step back from the thinking processes. In that sense, we could say it is an aspect of light: 'Let there be light' is the biblical connection. As the first cause emerging from the world that lies beyond time and space, consciousness awakens and illumines; it is timeless, although when associated with the manifest creation, it appears to be subject to time and appears to undergo an evolutionary process. No human mind can fully comprehend it, but we have the capacity to connect with it at will and consciously engage with it.

In the moment of experience, we can say that consciousness illuminates the mind, revealing the meaning and purpose behind experience, and the brain, representing the form side of our being, is at the receiving end. The brain, in turn, can actively participate in what is being registered, and in common experience, it will turn it into something which is personal, exclusive and/or analytical. This is not to deny that the complex computer we call the physical brain co-ordinates the mass of information and stimuli streaming through it from moment to moment. But the suggestion here is that, as understanding grows of the nature and source of consciousness, we will gain a truer and much more balanced perspective of the status and function of the brain as the receptor for an infinite variety of impulses reaching it from both higher sources and, notably, but not exclusively, the consciousness as embodied by the soul, as well as from the lower more mundane stimuli already well-documented by science.

It is true that many, perhaps the majority of modern scientists would question the whole idea of the soul. It would seem to be a world apart from their particular field of enquiry. But this is changing, and my understanding is that there are scientists around now who are focussing very much upon this aspect.

I offer these thoughts to try to move the argument forward. Coming face to face with these issues could enable us to understand more about the other big problem: that of evolution. It is this problem, as Raymond Tallis puts it, of 'Darwinising the mind'. Darwin's theory of evolution seems to have captured the collective imagination and, I suppose, it is difficult to fault, so far as it goes. But I suspect it is only half the story. My sense is that it co-exists (and has done since our beginnings) with the evolution of consciousness. Here is another elephant in the room! But to me, it is the key piece. Ancient occult knowledge is quite clear that it is the evolution of consciousness, not form, that is the real basis of the creation and of our evolutionary progress. I mean by this that consciousness, as the governing principle, is striving as it were, through the vehicle of the soul, toward a higher and more refined state, and in this process, the body, in whatever form it may appear, is merely adjusting itself, over vast periods of time, to this inner process of change. In common parlance, our task is to spiritualise matter. This is one way of expressing this vast evolutionary movement.

All this is not something that the scientific community is comfortable with at this time, though my sense is that it resonates with many members of the Network. Sadly perhaps, you would be hard pressed to find any confirmation of this bigger picture in the land of orthodox religion, other than, perhaps, from a collection of ill-founded, highly speculative statements. I think this is partly because religious writings appear to lack any precise and convincing 'cosmology' that you find in some of the esoteric traditions, of which the Alice Bailey writings are a good example.

But there is another major problem. Outside the comfortable world of mainstream science, what authority has one individually expressed view when pitched against another? We have come to respect all views and, in a sense, to give them equal weight because they are all merely starting points or points of departure. But we can at least see that the obsession that science has with the form side of life has become a serious impediment. And no doubt most of us would agree that the intellectual climate is now moving through a very profound period of change. Paradigm shifts never begin at the level of the ordinary intellect, the cosy stalking ground of scientism. The process itself is inscrutable. All we can do is to catch the wave, helped, as always, by those gifted, deeply intuitive souls who can see it coming. I imagine that true intuition in this context is more akin to an act of surrender:

surrender to the wave; but in every case it must also amount to a surrender to a much deeper level of understanding. When it is fully engaged, say with the appearance of a creative genius, the world begins to shake.

How far we have progressed with this 'New Renaissance' is hard to say. Perhaps at this time we can do no better than to develop a sensitivity to this higher faculty of the soul and to make room for it in our intellectual toolbox. It will never be seen writing papers or making impressive speeches. It reveals itself to the mind by its elegance and its utter simplicity. And in the quiet mind, as many will testify, it can give us wonderful insights into what lies behind the issues and ideas we are trying to express.

In saying all this, I do, of course run the risk of over dramatising what is at stake here, and I admit to being too close to a particular perspective to be any judge of that. But I am trying to paint a picture of consciousness on a wider canvas, one which is much closer to what one might call the science of life. From this perspective, it seems fairly clear that behind all the many speeches, articles and speculation on these basic matters, there remains a serious issue to be addressed about how we conduct this whole enquiry and what we can expect from it. One reason for this is that consciousness studies are a key declared interest for the the Network; and rightly so. Consciousness is not only subject to serious scientific research; it also stands at the heart of all spiritual aspiration and all true spiritual enquiry. It is the expansion of consciousness, linked with the growth of sensitivity and perceptive awareness, that is the key feature of the development of the human being. It is this passing from one state of consciousness to another higher and more refined state, thereby evolving a more sensitive instrument for the soul to use, which is a factor common to all human beings (and indeed to all the lower kingdoms in nature) a factor which, in the end, validates the claim that evolution on this planet is essentially about the evolution of consciousness. As the governing principle, it stands above and beyond, but also embraces, the evolution of form, which can do nothing but follow in its wake.

The lack of any meaningful consensus around the issues discussed here is a major problem. Finding solutions through both new and existing lines of enquiry, is the major challenge.

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