

## Consciousness and Conquest

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In exploring consciousness, are we searching for truth or for wisdom? Are we looking for decisive facts *about* consciousness or for enlightening *lived* experience?

A couple of years ago, as I strolled around the poster sessions at the University of Arizona's "Toward a Science of Consciousness" conference, I was struck by one presentation in particular-"Preconquest Consciousness" by a Stanford University anthropologist, E Richard Sorenson. His paper was also a chapter in a just-published book *Tribal Epistemologies*. I didn't have time to read the entire piece, but what I saw caught my attention. Sorenson distinguished between two very different forms of consciousness: "preconquest," characteristic of the minds of indigenous peoples, and "postconquest," typified by modern rationalism. "Conquest" refers to what happened to indigenous consciousness and ways of life when Spanish conquistadors invaded the New World.

I picked up a copy of the book to read on the flight back to San Francisco. Sorenson's thesis, based on many years of field study with numerous "isolates" or indigenous cultures, shocked me. Preconquest consciousness is rooted in *feeling*, a form of liminal awareness hardly recognized in modern scholarship. Shaped by a "lush sensuality"-where from infancy primal peoples grow up accustomed to a great deal of body-to-body contact-preconquest consciousness aims not for abstract truth but for *what feels good*. Individuals in such societies are highly sensitive to changes in muscle tension in others indicating shifts in mood. If others feel good, they feel good; if others feel bad, they feel bad-Sorenson calls it "sociosensual" awareness. In other words, the entire thrust and motivation of this form of consciousness is to optimize feelings of well-being in the community. What is "real" or "right" (we might call it "true") is what feels good. In such cultures, the "right" or the "true" or the "real" is a question of *value*, not a correspondence between some pattern of abstract concepts and empirical fact.

Significantly, postconquest consciousness is radically different. Based on dialectical reasoning, it intrinsically involves domination or conquest: A thesis is confronted and "conquered" by its antithesis, which in turn is overcome by a new synthesis. By its very nature, then, dialectic, rational, postconquest consciousness is *confrontational*. This insight alone stopped me in my tracks.

But what I learned next shook me to my core. Given the different dynamics and intrinsic motivations underlying both forms of consciousness, when postconquest rationalism meets preconquest feeling the result is outright suppression and conquest of feeling by reason- *inevitably*.

In its search for truth, reason operates via conquistadorial dialectic: One idea, or one person's "truth," is confronted and overcome by an opposite idea or someone else's "truth." The clash or struggle between them produces the new synthesis-perceived as a creative advance in knowledge.

By contrast, liminal or preconquest consciousness, in striving for what feels right for the collective, seeks to accommodate differences. When confronted by reason, it naturally

wants to please the other, and so invariably yields. Reason strives to conquer, feeling strives to please, and the result: obliteration or suppression of liminal consciousness by reason.

Even more disturbing to me was the realization that none of this implies malicious intent on the part of reason. Simply encountering an epistemology of feeling, reason will automatically overshadow it- *even if its intent is honorable.*

As I looked back on my own career, I found plenty of confirming instances. In my work, I have had many occasions to engage people interested in consciousness from perspectives other than philosophy or science-mysticism, shamanism, aesthetics, for example. More often than not- *even if I was trying to be considerate* of their different ways of knowing- these people left the encounter feeling abused or squashed by having to match accounts of their experiences against the rigorous logic of rational analysis. When a search for truth pits dialectic reason against dialogic experience the feeling component of the other's knowledge can rarely withstand the encounter. Feeling feels invalidated. Wisdom is blocked by "truth."

Sorenson's thesis allowed me to understand this dynamic in a way I hadn't before. And his paper didn't leave me with merely an intellectual appreciation of the pre-conquest-post-conquest dynamic. He backed his thesis with a truly moving and shocking first-hand account of the disintegration of an entire way of life of a New Guinea tribe when their remote island was discovered by Western tourists after World War II.

*Before the "invasion," the Neolithic hunter-gatherer tribe lived with a "heart-felt rapprochement based on integrated trust"-a sensual "intuitive rapport" between the people. Their communication was spontaneous, open, and honest. For them, "truth-talk" was "affect-talk" because it worked only when "personal feelings were above board and accurately expressed, which required transparency in aspirations, interests, and desires. . . . What mattered was the magnitude of collective joy produced."*

In the real life of these pre-conquest people, feeling and awareness are focused on at-the-moment, point-blank sensory experience-as if the nub of life lay within that complex flux of collective sentient immediacy. Into that flux individuals thrust their inner thoughts and aspirations for all to see, appreciate, and relate to. This unabashed open honesty is the foundation on which their highly honed integrative empathy and rapport become possible. When that openness gives way, empathy and rapport shrivel. Where deceit becomes a common practice, they disintegrate.

Within a week of the tourists' arrival on the island, a way of life and a form of consciousness that had lasted for hundreds, if not thousands, of years collapsed-irreversibly. Sorenson describes a "grand cultural amnesia" where whole populations forgot even recent past events, and made "gross factual errors in reporting them. In some cases, they even forgot what type and style of garment they had worn a few years earlier or (in New Guinea) that they had been using stone axes and eating their dead close relatives a few years back. . . . The selfless unity that seemed so firm and self-repairing in their isolated enclaves vanished like a summer breeze as a truth-based type of consciousness gave way to one that lied to live."

Thirty thousand feet up, Sorenson's account of the crisis point in this people's cultural collapse brought tears to my eyes:

In a single crucial week a spirit that all the world would want, not just for themselves but for all others, was lost, one that had taken millennia to create. It was suddenly just gone. Epidemic sleeplessness, frenzied dance throughout the night, reddening burned-out eyes getting narrower and more vacant as the days and nights wore on, dysphasias of various sorts, sudden mini-epidemics of spontaneous estrangement, lacunae in perception, hyperkinesis, loss of sensuality, collapse of love, impotence, bewildered frantic looks like those on buffalo in India just as they're clubbed to death; 14 year olds (and others) collapsing on the beach. . . . Such was the general scene that week, a week that no imagination could have forewarned, the week in which the subtle sociosensual glue of the island's traditional way-of-life became unstuck.

I had gone to that Tucson conference to present a detailed paper calling for the inclusion of intersubjectivity, for a relational-based approach to understanding the nature and dynamics of consciousness.

I was moved to include the second-person perspective because for years I felt something important was being left out in the debate between first-person (subjective/experiential) and third-person (objective) investigations of consciousness. Since most of our day-to-day experiences involve relationships of one sort or another, it seemed to me that overlooking this common aspect of consciousness remains a conspicuous gap in philosophy of mind and consciousness studies in general.

The paradox or irony of my situation did not escape me. I was there to champion the primacy of relationship in consciousness-implicating a mutuality of shared feeling-yet the contrast between my intellectual analysis of intersubjectivity and my lack of *experienced relational consciousness* was stark. Not only in my relationships with others, but within myself, I had been using reason to the virtual exclusion of any real depth of feeling. My own professional life was a microcosm of the encounter between postconquest and preconquest consciousness-between the modern rational mind and the traditional intuitive mind. I was accumulating philosophical knowledge about consciousness, but losing touch with the living roots of wisdom.

#### Different Ways of Knowing

If Sorenson's analysis of the fateful clash between postconquest and preconquest consciousness is correct, the prospect for non-rational ways of knowing seems bleak-but only if we accept the (rather unlikely) premise that rationality is the epistemological endgame. Clearly, we have abundant evidence from the perennial philosophy and from modern spiritual teachers and practitioners that mystical experience transcends reason. We can evolve beyond reason, and when we do so we do not obliterate the benefits we've gained from reason over the past four or five thousand years.

Put another way: Even though historically-as Sorenson's work documents-when primal feeling-based knowing meets modern reason-based knowing, the encounter invariably decimates the former, *this need not be the end of the story*. Beyond reason, we all have the potential to develop transmodern spiritual or mystical intuition-and this way of knowing includes and integrates all the others.

From below, reason is grounded in preverbal feelings and intuitions; above, reason projects imagination toward transverbal and transrational experiences. Prior to reason, interconnected feelings and altered states of consciousness appear to reason as magic-the

undefinable domain of the shaman. Beyond reason, unities and communions of experiences and higher states of consciousness appear to reason as ineffable and noetic-the infinite domain of the mystic.

Whereas reason dominates feeling, mystical knowing does not "conquer" reason-it envelops it, embraces it,*transcends* it. Thus, mystical or spiritual intuition is integrative: It includes, while transcending, both reason and somatic feeling. Nothing is ever quite so neat, however, that it fits comfortably into such models (which, after all, are mostly the product of rational knowing). For example, it is not accurate to say that in every case where postconquest reason encounters prequest liminal consciousness the result is obliteration of the indigenous mind. This may well be true culturally-at least I'm not aware of any meeting between groups bearing modern reason and groups using primal knowing where the modern mind was consumed by the indigenous mind. But it is not true *personally*, at the level of individuals. We know from the literature (anthropological and psychological), and from copious anecdotal reports, that when a modern, reason-dominated individual ingests powerful psychoactive plant-derived substances such as *ayahuasca* or synthetic compounds such as LSD, or engages in some other powerful mind-altering practice such as intensive drumming or dancing, the overwhelming effect is that reason takes a back seat. It is swamped by non-rational feelings and other ways of knowing-and according to many of the participants in these "experiments" or "rituals" the states and contents of such "altered" consciousness are highly meaningful, informative, and veridical. In these instances, primal, shamanic knowing does overshadow rational knowing.

Furthermore, reason doesn't *have to* decimate feeling-it does so only when unplugged from its roots in the deep wisdom of the body. Reason is optimally effective when it retains or regains contact with its preverbal, somatic roots. Reason works very differently when we *feel* our thinking.

### The Dilemma of Reason

In my own life and work, I had developed an *over*-reliance on reason, and I had failed to see that that is not at all rational. It is a distortion of reason.

This is not a new insight. Some of our best philosophers have recognized this imbalance between what we may call "clear reason" and "distorted reason." Right back at the dawn of Western philosophy, Socrates and Plato knew that reason was limited, and that before anyone could know what those limits were they had to master reason to get there. Only then, could they move to the next stage. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant took on this challenge as his life's major project and demonstrated the imbalance in his great work *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Whitehead, too, was a master of reason, perhaps the best, because he moved far enough along to know that clear reason is rooted in feeling.

Clear reason knows that the limits of reason are not the limits of knowledge-and certainly not the limits of reality. And failing to recognize this is a major part of the problem-not just *my* problem, but a dilemma for the modern philosophy as a whole, indeed for the modern world in general.

So much of academic philosophy of mind is about finding flaws in the other guy's logic, and taking no prisoners. It operates from the assumption that progress is built on discovering what is wrong and putting it right. We might even call it a "via negativa"-except that would distort the meaning of that phrase in spiritual practice. If the pursuit of truth leads to a

bifurcation, separating it from wisdom and compassion, something must be wrong. At best, such philosophizing could lead only to eviscerated abstractions, and could tell us nothing much of value about the *lived* world, the world as we actually experience it. If philosophy of mind produces fine, detailed, meticulous arguments but fails to embrace the fact that *feeling* is central to the very nature of consciousness-the "whatitfeelslike from within"-then the discipline is moribund.

The study of consciousness cannot rely exclusively on rational coherence-on relationships between concepts and ideas. It must involve the ineffable, preverbal, pre-rational process I can best describe right now as "feeling our way into feeling," of *experiencing* experience. And the more I pay attention to this, the more I come to realize that first-person exploration of experience sooner or later comes with a message: "We are not alone." We are not isolated, solipsist bubbles of consciousness, experience, or subjectivity (pick your favorite word), we exist in a world of relationships. We are-consciousness is- *intersubjective*. Any comprehensive investigation of consciousness must include the second-person perspective of *engaged presence*, of being-in-relationship.

Here's the dilemma: On the one hand, we have lost touch with the deep foundation of reason in the feelings of the body, and the network of feelings in nature. On the other hand, we have not made full use of the gift of reason we already have. This second problem is rooted in the first. But both must be worked on together. Our problem, then, is not really too much, but *not enough*, reason-not enough of the right kind: *clear reason* rooted in the feelings of the body, informed by intersubjective relationship and meaning, and open to transcendental shafts of wisdom. Philosophy need not be built on conflict, on clashing worldviews, as John Stuart Mill noted when he said (paraphrase): "Philosophers tend to be right in what they affirm, and tend to be wrong in what they deny." Perceptive and wise insights like that show that philosophy can live up to its name.

Imagine practicing philosophy by looking for what is *right* about the other's position. That kind of attitudinal shift begins to pull philosophy and spirituality closer, and truth approaches wisdom. My own variation on this insight is:

Every worldview expresses some deep truth-and is in error only if it claims possession of the whole truth. . . . That is, there is probably some deep kernel of uncommon truth in every worldview-whether scientific materialism, spiritual idealism, mind-body dualism, or panpsychism-and the task of honest philosophers is to uncover such truths. The task of great philosophers is to find how these uncommon truths cohere in a common reality.

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