

## On Consciousness and Medievalism

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It seems odd that psychiatrists like me, whose chief business centres around the follies and pathologies of consciousness, are often more comfortable thinking in terms of unconsciousness. We like to consider, for example, serotonin systems in the brain instead of experiences of impulsivity or depression, and we make elaborate theories about subconscious motivations. Things were not always like this. William James or Wundt at the end of the nineteenth century took for granted that consciousness should be given a starring role in both normal and abnormal psychology. Then came a range of people, most notably the Behaviourists, who said in effect, 'This is all too messy and you're getting nowhere. Let's just ignore consciousness so that we can get down to some proper, scientific work'. The influence of this line of thought lingers on and even cognitive psychology nowadays appears curiously ambivalent in its attitude to awareness. The ambivalence may primarily be due to lack of adequate concepts for dealing with consciousness. In a sense it comprises the entire world of each one of us, as nothing exists for us if we are not conscious, but on the other hand allegedly scientific thinking tells us that it is an epiphenomenon (i.e., an ineffective by-product, like the froth on a breaking wave) of neural information processing, or maybe even an illusion of some sort <sup>1</sup>.

Ironically enough the influence of the Behaviourists was maximal just at the time when it was becoming clear to some physicists, particularly to many of those who were developing quantum theory, that conscious mind has a central part to play in any adequate scientific description of reality even though it is hard to pin down the exact nature of its role. The Behaviourists were in fact being 'scientific' in relation to an outdated conception of science, as is everyone today who still consciously or unconsciously assents to their presuppositions. But the quantum theorists had their own problems. They could not agree on a description of mind's role and ranged from a vague pan-psychism to an impenetrable mathematical formalism. Others could therefore readily ignore their views, especially as the so-called 'scientific' outlook did yield practical benefits in the form of treatments for mental illness which, though less effective than is often claimed, were nevertheless more substantial than anything produced by holistic or spiritual approaches.

We're left, it often seems, with a Hobson's choice between a set of notions which is clearly wrong at any deep level, but to some extent works in the workaday world, and a proto-theory which may be basically right but has never quite got beyond the 'proto-' stage and is of no practical use. What's needed from the quantum theorists is a way to look at the world on which all can agree now. Penrose's ideas may eventually be incorporated in such a world-view, but at present are too tied to controversial specifics to be generally acceptable<sup>2</sup>. Bohm's concept of the implicate as opposed to the explicate order has more general appeal but is still not entirely satisfactory as it is somewhat vague and grew from his 'hidden variable' notions which have always had their problems<sup>3</sup>. There is however a similar, less well known but more powerful conceptual tool which was introduced by Scheibe <sup>4</sup> and subsequently developed by Primas <sup>5</sup>. This is the distinction between the *ontic* (not to be confused with ontological though carrying similarities of meaning) and the *epistemic* (not quite the same as epistemological) realms. The *ontic* realm is prior to all experience and is holistic. Quantum superpositions inhabit it: those strange fields of possibility or potentiality from which arise the world that we know. Although concepts of time and space have some meaning in relation to it, separate times and spaces do not exist within the *ontic* realm. The

concept has clear affinities to that of the deep, still pool of Being that so many mystics have discerned behind the world of appearances. The *epistemic* realm, on the other hand, corresponds to our everyday world and our conscious perceptions of it. It includes all the experiments which physicists, behaviourists or anyone else can ever perform. Nevertheless it is derived from the *ontic* world and indeed must in some contexts be considered a sub-system of that world. Quantum theory, in particular, must be regarded as a context-dependent sub-system that deals with aspects of the relationship between *ontic* and *epistemic* realms; in fact (*pace* the theologians) it is the only rigorous system of ideas in existence that does so. The particular technical advantage of Scheibe's notion is that it involves using two different mathematical objects (a  $C^*$  and a  $W^*$  algebra respectively) to describe the two different realms, while other formulations of quantum theory attempt to shoehorn both realms into a single type of mathematics.

What has this theorizing to do with conscious mind? Well, one of the most obvious characteristics of consciousness is invariable possession of what philosophers term 'intentionality' (i.e., consciousness is always about something, even if the 'something' in question may very occasionally be nothing other than awareness of being aware). In other words one of its essential characteristics is possession of meaning. Another characteristic, as the neuroscientists are constantly telling us, is that it arises from the most complex system known to us (i.e., the human brain). When the notions of meaning and of complexity are related to the *ontic/epistemic* distinction it becomes obvious that meaning basically refers to the *ontic* level, while complexity is operationally accessible only at the *epistemic* level<sup>6</sup>. As a complex, meaningful system, conscious mind must hover somewhere between the two realms. There's a sort of beach, partially described by quantum theory, that exists between the *ontic* sea and the *epistemic* dry land. Conscious minds, then, can be pictured as crabs scuttling between the two, participating to some extent in both realms but experimentally accessible only on dry land. The idea that our minds are like amphibians participating in both the spiritual and the material has of course a very long history, but has lost much of its force since notions of the 'spiritual' became so vague. The new physics however is both re-vitalizing, albeit while re-interpreting, the concept of a 'spiritual' realm and is indicating that our minds have their true home in the *ontic* ocean where time and space are quite different from our everyday concepts of them.

Atmanspacher (for *aficionados* of meaningful coincidences, it's worth pointing out that his name translates as 'flow of the soul') has recently come up with the additional notion of *relative onticity* (personal communication). The idea is that what is *epistemic* at one level of reality can be *ontic* in relation to another level so that there's a sort of hierarchy of *onticity* based, at a perhaps infinite distance down the hierarchy, on an irreducible and indescribable *ontic* level. It's a concept that feels right and would certainly make life easier for philosophers who try to describe the ontology of particular entities - a problem which tied even the great Karl Popper in knots in relation to his 'World 3' (i.e., the world of human culture).

All a bit too abstract to trouble us psychiatrists in our workaday worlds perhaps, or perhaps not? The world-view arising from this set of notions has analogies with that of the medieval Schoolmen and is almost as complete as theirs. There are consequences for medicine which follow from any world-view. In this case for instance, archetypes (if defined as the background factors which predispose to the spread of shared awarenesses in groups of people) must be regarded as more than abstractions even when they are not expressions of

the biological structure of our brains. They must not only be envisaged as having all the power that C.G. Jung ascribed to them, but also as being far more widespread and various than he may have considered. There are archetypes at work encouraging the spread of thuggishness or Thatcherism or, of more immediate concern to doctors, the various fashionable illnesses that come and go. They need to be pictured, according to these ideas, rather as a Schoolman envisaged 'spirits of the air' - i.e., as ubiquitous, sometimes diabolic or angelic, though more often morally neutral, and as able to influence profoundly our everyday worlds and even the illnesses to which we are prone. If some illness is due to this sort of 'haunting' then appropriate treatment approaches need to be developed (or further developed, as many alternative therapists could claim that they already deal in concepts of this type). How we picture mind does matter to us all at a practical, as well as a theoretical, level.

#### References

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