

The Imaginal In Ancient Persian Religion and Modern Experience

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Paul Devereux, Gloucestershire, England The following paper is a modified version of the introductory lecture given at the 'Otherworld Reality' Conference organised by the Consciousness Connection and held at The Royal Society of Arts, London, May 1 & 2, 1999.

There is a remarkable level or realm of consciousness that the scholar of Islamic religions, the late Henri Corbin, called the "Imaginal", in which some or all the physical senses - sight, hearing, smell, taste, and even touch - seem to be operative in an environment that appears to have full spatial reality as we understand it in our normal waking consciousness, and yet which is not physically real. Those who have experienced this will not need to be told that this "Otherworld" is not merely some metaphorical or symbolic device, but a direct, experiential fact for the person encountering it. We are not talking here merely about vivid dreams, or fleeting hallucinations, or jumbled drug-induced mental mirages, but a coherent, relatively stable state of consciousness in which access to what appears to be an alternate environmental reality is achieved. It can contain landscapes and vistas, mountains and rivers, light and dark, music and voices, complex interiors, the taste of wine and the scent of roses, and sometimes the presence of entities that can be human in appearance, or suprahuman, or non-human. All of these things appear real to the perceiver, but they are literally non-sensory. This Imaginal reality also seems able to interact in unusual ways with physical reality in certain circumstances.

Problems with Understanding

Our understanding of the nature of this specific state of consciousness, as with other altered states, is hindered by three underlying factors:

- The first concerns the numerous conditions that can encourage the manifestation of this Otherworld mental reality. These conditions are all those which can be loosely termed "trance-inducing". So, for examples, the Otherworld reality can be accessed deliberately through the use of meditation, breathing exercises, intensive prayer, initiatory practices, and other religious techniques, and deliberately or accidentally through fasting, sensory deprivation or overload, sleep deprivation, physical exhaustion, the ingestion of psychoactive substances, bodily trauma, hypnotic distraction, entering or waking up from sleep, becoming consciously alert within a dream, neurophysiological aberration, physical or mental illness, and a host of other conditions and circumstances. Some people seem particularly prone to entering this Otherworld mental state, while others have to work very hard indeed to achieve access. Shamans, visionaries, or mystics in all societies and periods of time have tended to be the ones who can enter the Otherworld with relative ease.
- The second factor is really a corollary of the first, namely the variety of frames of reference, or contexts, into which the Imaginal realm is placed in modern society, which has no overarching philosophical framework regarding it. Indeed, we are, as a culture, largely ignorant of the Imaginal realm, being somewhat primitive in our understanding of consciousness in general. So, for instance, a person in a First World society today who falls into a trance while driving along a straight road at night, or who enters a similar state while falling asleep or awakening from a nap, and who then experiences an apparently real, physical world in which strange and disturbing

things are taking place and in which curious beings appear, is likely to interpret the encounter as a "UFO abduction" because of prevailing cultural influences in such societies. Other conceptual boxes commonly used today to package the Imaginal experience include: out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, lucid dreaming, hallucinogenic visions, hallucinations, sleep paralysis, night visitors, and so forth. Although these terms merely apply either to the circumstances triggering the experience of the Imaginal realm, or to a specific aspect of it, they tend to be viewed as separate phenomena - a consequence of the fragmenting nature of our current cultural processes. It is very difficult to persuade people to cross boundaries, to get outside of their conceptual boxes. The question of treating the mental state involved as a single phenomenon therefore tends to get by-passed.

- The third underlying confounding factor is the basic materialistic philosophy that currently orients the intellectual compass of our culture. This ensures that any generally acceptable scientific theory dealing with the Otherworld experience, where science bothers with it at all, has to reduce it to a phenomenon rising solely from the workings of the brain - to neurophysiological explanations. Within its frame, this explanatory approach is a powerful one and has to be taken on board by anyone seeking to understand the Imaginal experience. It is known from work with brain trauma patients as well as from experimental research, that visions, or, if you prefer, hallucinations, can be produced by modifying neurophysiological processes. We know that it is the brain processing away within the darkness of the skull that conjures the world we apprehend around us, yet we so easily forget that that apparently solid and "real" world is a mental construct. The brain may even conjure a ghost we call the "mind" or "self", and some contemporary philosophers of consciousness try to maintain that consciousness itself is an illusion. Such proponents argue that if "I" do not exist, if "I" am not in the body, how can "I" possibly have an out-of-body experience? Further (the reductionist argument goes), as the physical, sensory world is conjured up by the brain, why is it difficult to accept that fantasy worlds can be created with similar reality by the workings of the brain, the most complex object we know of in the universe? And it is apparent that the content of the Imaginal realm can be affected by prevailing cultural imagery and motifs.

These are good arguments, and at some level they have to be true. But in the words of the song, "Is that all there is?" Is there only a strict choice between scientific reductionism or naive literalism?

Other Approaches

There are, in fact, important shades of grey between these extremes. One of these shades concerns quantum reality. We might note that while the sensory world is created for us within our brain from raw information received from the environment, what actually gets built into the mental model we know as consensus reality is only a tiny snapshot of what is actually "out there". Underpinning the vast range of shuttling energies that comprise the universe, including the brain itself, is the mysterious quantum sea, the unborn mother of all energy, and therefore all matter and manifestation - if you like, it is the Dao, the source of the ten thousands things. So could the worlds we see in the Imaginal realm have their origins in that sea just as much as do the sensory data we process in normal everyday reality? Is

information from some distantly deep level of reality being presented to us as a psychodrama using the costumes found in the brain's wardrobe of sensory experience?

Or, again, is there evidence to show that the Imaginal realm can be more than simply a private, subjective event? Where does the paranormal fit into this picture? This, too, deserves further exploration.

A third approach is to posit that we are locked into a kind of lucid dream. If this is so, then the physical laws that science studies are simply aspects of that greater lucid dream.

Fourthly, we should not rule out traditional models such as there being an actual spirit world. We can accommodate that idea and still keep some scientific rigour on board by considering that our minds can make contact with such a spirit world only through the medium of neurophysiological mechanisms. The one might not necessarily exclude the other.

Finally, to bring us full circuit, there are perhaps paradigms for probing the nature of Imaginal consciousness that have yet to be constructed. Among the possible sources of these, we have to consider looking into the truly deep and sophisticated religious experience of an Otherworld reality that emanated from ancient Persia, and which caused Henri Corbin to coin the term "Imaginal" in the first place.

The 'Interworld'

Putting it all very simplistically, this philosophy emerged out of Zoroastrian or Mazdean Iran. It held that each human being has a number of bodies or souls, a perishable physical body, a subtle elemental body that is imperishable, plus spiritual bodies. Each of these projects its own "Earth", rather than merely passively experiencing an environment. So the physical body has the physical Earth as its environment, while the other bodies have varieties of visionary or spirit Earths as their respective environments. This philosophy means that the world that is perceived is itself soul-like in nature, thus the distinction between subject and object is removed, which is, of course, an unfamiliar pattern of thinking for the modern Western mind. At death or in visionary states or mystic rapture, we can rise through the bodies, automatically transforming the Earth that is perceived or experienced, a form of transfiguration glimpsed by Wordsworth when he wrote:

... The earth, and every common sight/ To me did seem/ Apparelled in celestial light/ The glory and the freshness of a dream.

Now, to continue oversimplifying this immensely subtle and complex philosophy, the Zoroastrian system encompassed the idea of a visionary or Otherworld geography. This was mythically projected onto the physical geography of ancient Iran, but was in essence what Corbin referred to as the *mundus Imaginalis archetypus*. It had what we would call zones but which the Iranian texts referred to as "climates". The "eighth climate" was a central, "world-*navel*" zone occupied by a paradisaical enclosure that has gone by numerous names over the many centuries and various religious contexts in which it has found itself: Eran Vej, the Earth of Hurqalya, the Earth of the Emerald Cities, the Celestial Earth, the Earth of Visions, the Transfigured Earth. In Sufi tradition it is called *Barzakh*, the Interworld. This Interworld paradise secretes light, *Xvarnha*, the Light of Glory, the primordial universal force permeating all things, and the substance of souls. In the Interworld one does not cast a

shadow - a euphemistic way of saying that one cannot enter there in the corporeal body. It is the subtle or elemental body that is the natural denizen of the Interworld.

This Interworld is real but non-physical. As one Islamic mystic put it: "This intermediate world... is the world through which spirits are embodied, and bodies are spiritualised." Corbin said it mediated between "the sensory and the intelligible". It was precisely because this state was so difficult to describe let alone conceive that he coined "Imaginal", knowing that the adjective "imaginary" in our modern usage was far too weak and would falsely imply that the Interworld was somehow unreal.

In attempting to find adequate ways of trying comprehend the ontological status of Imaginal consciousness, we might yet come to realise that within this ancient Interworld philosophy there is model we can re-work and make new use of today.

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Paul Devereux's 'The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Ancient Earth Mysteries' has just been published, two further major titles are due out before the end of 2000, and he is currently at work on some of the implications raised in this paper.