

Drynachan Seminar 1998

Drynachan Lodge

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This year's Drynachan seminar picked up some of the threads from last year's 'Neuroscience, Responsibility and the Law' by looking into the metaphysics underlying questions of free will and responsibility. We asked what room current science had for transcendent experience and how a more open acknowledgement of a transcendent dimension might change the scope of science.

In my introduction I took my cue from William James and Sir Arthur Eddington, both men who have had a seminal influence on our understanding of the relationship between science and religion. The word science derives from the Latin *scientia* meaning knowledge, and its root comes from *scire*, meaning to cut. The modern use of the term dates from the 17th century when it had already become a systematic analysis of primary or measurable qualities. As Eddington remarked: 'If only pointer readings or their equivalents are put into the machine of scientific calculation, how can we grind out anything but pointer readings?' What we have is a mental image, a counterpart in external world and a set of readings. This amounts to a symbolic representation that exists in the mind of the scientist. The root question here is whether the physical world is self-contained and self-sufficient or opens into other dimensions which may causally impinge upon it.

This brings us to questions of epistemology: what are valid and reliable ways of knowing and perceiving? Here one is reminded of the Platonic division between knowledge and opinion: in Plato's day knowledge was of being and opinion concerned the realm of becoming, while nowadays this is more or less reversed by equating knowledge with objectivity and opinion - inherently unreliable - with the subjective. However, the emerging science of consciousness points towards a science of subjective qualities and the creative use of intuition or what Bonaventure called the eye of contemplation.

Reality is another loaded word. It implicitly carries a value judgement and has undergone a similar inversion to the knowledge-opinion distinction referred to above. The mediaeval nominalists were critical in shifting the definition of reality from an internal to an external reference point, a shift that was reinforced during the Galilean period in the 17th century. However, Louis Dupré reminds us that 'mental life an essential component of the real - the nature of the real is determined by the nature of the relation among its components, of which the mind is the primary one. Ever since Aristotle, categories of being have been structures of relatedness'.

Dupré further comments in relation to transcendent experience that 'in an age when religion can no longer count on the support of the entire culture, the emphasis on experience becomes essential for its survival'. It is perhaps no coincidence that this century has seen so much emphasis on and analysis of transcendent experience, dating back to William James at the end of the last century. In the concluding chapter of his *Varieties of Religious Experience* he outlines the characteristics of the religious life, among them the following: 1) 'that the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it derives its chief significance'; and 2) 'that union or harmonious relation with that higher world is our true end'. These conclusions emerge from the data of James' work, although it could be argued that he was predisposed towards this type of conclusion. James clearly believed in the reality

of a transcendent dimension, one that is also indicated in many studies of the near-death experience. most recently in the new book by Kenneth Ring reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Dupré reminds us that our current task is that of creating a different outlook on the real and, like Goethe's organs of perception, a new perceptiveness for detecting it.

CHRIS CLARKE and MAX PAYNE began by considering the current scientific world-view and its limitations. Chris identified atomism as the scientific programme dominating physical science and dating back to Lucretius' formulation of fundamental entities with simple interactions moving in a void; its world-view is mechanistic and its methodology reductionist. A second characteristic was what he called 'objectism', which entails removing the distinctly human from scientific methodology and translating everything into the third person. The consequence of these two features is a slant towards lower levels in such areas as molecular biology and genetics, and a concomitant impossibility of a scientific study of consciousness.

Max contended that science is a method or process of truth-seeking enquiry that aimed at a description which would be true for all possible observers. It is the paradigm for all truth-seeking activities and involves both selection and abstraction. There is a commitment to impartial accurate observation linked to hypotheses to be tested. Objectivity rests on personal values - honesty and self-criticism are in fact moral commitments. Such an open system is related to open society, as exemplified in the writings of Polanyi and Popper. He summed up his view by saying that science was a self-critical dynamic evolutionary process between experience and understanding. The ensuing discussion raised questions about the degree and depth of empiricism, the importance of the history of science and epistemological questions, the possible development of participatory research and the significance of interpersonal knowledge.

The second session explored the significance for science of spiritual and mystical experience. PEGGY MORGAN from the Alister Hardy Centre in Oxford began by asserting the primacy of experience. The work of the Centre points to a 'cumulative argument' about the validity of the experiences in their database in conjunction with evidence from a wide range of sources. She felt that such experiences helped sustain religious traditions, although EILEEN BARKER pointed out that interpretations differed over time and that some people even dismissed experience as unreal because they could not agree with the interpretation. ELIA WISE felt that self-knowledge was critical and that we were seeking union with the essence that we are seeking to explore. She spoke of flipping between perspectives - from duality to circle - so that she could no longer construct the self that had that position. The main point was to remain aware of one's position within the larger whole. The snag, as Max pointed out, was that we tried to fit experiences into our existing theoretical framework that screens certain phenomena out. Is this an error or distortion? ANNE BANCROFT read a paper from the Zen tradition, the journey that begins by perceiving the mountain as a mountain - something stable - but then one realises that things are not as they appear: nothing can be grasped, yet it is still there. Zen stresses change of perception, the transformation of real things into miracles: seeing the infinite in all things is to see God - the reality beyond names. One can see without attachment; maya is the way we think the world is, but in fact nothing is self-existing. At this point life is the 'appearance of a mystery beyond fathoming'. DAVID FONTANA reminded us of the Buddhist quotation to the effect that when opposites arise, the Buddha mind is lost.

In the third session, David Fontana and PETER FENWICK examined models arising from subjective experience. David reminded us that inner experience is regarded as primary in the East and that various meditative practices are pursued in order to attain greater degrees of concentration, tranquillity, clarity and insight. Asking a koan can lead to an extension of the boundaries of consciousness and to action arising from Buddha consciousness. He saw the essential features of the mystical experience as unity, light and love. Peter Fenwick observed that models set up expectations that are related to one's understanding of human perceptual apparatus. He discussed two kinds of models: correlative brain function models examining physiological correlates and aspects of behaviour; and models based on reports of subjective experience in which consciousness had been altered in some way. He thought that the latter models led to a general conception of underlying 'mind-stuff' as envisaged by Eddington and asked if knowledge was the same within consciousness as expressed through it: this suggested a distinction between knowing and knowing about. He emphasised the importance of our reflective capacity as an aspect of our deeper being.

The fourth session considered implications of new models arising from scientific developments: how might a science of the subjective inform the objective perspective? Chris Clarke drew on quantum theory, taking his starting point from Bohr's approach of the two worlds - microscopic and macroscopic. To this can be added the inner private worlds of individual beings, each of whom is a world. In this sense the universe is a collection of worlds. He suggested two way causation, even though he felt that experiences and consciousness are not strictly speaking in space-time. He also made the point that the quantum state is pure potential and atemporal but not related to eternity, which is by definition fully actualised. David Fontana drew a parallel with the Buddhist idea of *sunyata* (the plenum void) as the infinite potential out of which the world arises. He remarked that no one owns consciousness and that time in Buddhist philosophy is characterised as impermanence.

JOHN KERR pointed out that science was cut off from its history and therefore from the underlying assumptions which have shaped its thinking. It has been more of an I-It dialogue than an I-Thou (Buber) model: the world is considered to be a mechanism out there and we are merely incidental products. He discussed models in ecology, in which a dynamic, self-directed, organismic approach was used. He thought that this reintroduced the notions of goals, purposes and aims especially when considered in relation to values. Developments in genetic engineering, however, carry an implicit determinism with their project of redesigning the human. The I-Thou axis implies a quality of relationship where rigour is not appropriate: value itself is relational. In the discussion Chris Clarke called for a restoration of sensibility, a feature of Goethe's approach, and reminded us that values were part of the content of consciousness. Eileen Barker questioned whether evolution could be used to argue that later was better than earlier in the unfolding process.

Eileen then had the unenviable task of speaking for the social sciences as a whole about meaning and ethics. She said that the aim of sociology of religion was to be value free but value relevant. She distinguished between appraising and characterising values, both of which must be refutable in principle. Criteria of definition were also very important, and we must resist the temptation to be selective in our analysis - for instance the suicide of a cult member may or may not be due to the cult; we cannot take it for granted. She had found it valuable to participate first hand in the cults that she had studied, since greater understanding emerges from such interaction. This in turn leads to an analysis of meaning,

purpose and the construction of identity within these communities. Max Payne observed that sociology is committed to a meta-analysis of religious experience and wondered if fundamentalism and sociology were incompatible. Sociology could be seen as the objective study of the subjective and shared this to some extent with psychology.

I introduced the next session on the emergence of a participatory world-view. I outlined the historical split between primary and secondary qualities (matter and mind) in Galileo and Descartes. This eventually gave rise to the materialistic thesis that matter gives rise to consciousness. Science concerned itself with externals, but it has recently become more interested in consciousness. Many people are now arguing that a science of consciousness cannot meaningfully exclude the subjective dimension, but the question is how to incorporate it. A participatory world-view suggests that the distinction between subject and object is less absolute and clear-cut than assumed above. It acknowledges the basic post-modern insight that the world as we perceive it is a construction, but questions its accompanying relativism. Levels of the construction of reality include the neural, mental, emotional, social and cultural. Suggestive parallels are provided by the role of the observer in quantum mechanics (although sometimes the observer is deemed to be a measuring apparatus), the co-creation of the environment in Gaia theory, and the interdependence implied in systems theory and ecological thinking.

I argued that consciousness is inherently participatory in all its manifestations. This is perhaps clearer in relation to altered states than in normal sense perception. For instance, the sense of self in the NDE and mystical experience is extended or even merged with its ground. The existence of different levels or states of consciousness suggests the possibility of developing one's consciousness through spiritual disciplines, a path already pursued by mystics and contemplatives of all traditions. The evolutionary process has been mapped by Richard Tarnas, while Mark Woodhouse's energy monism and Ken Wilber's integral approach to consciousness suggest possible formulations of a wider and deeper world-view. The discussion threw up the nature and role of the filters through which we see the world, concluding that it was crucial to apply self-consciousness to all disciplines so that one could understand the nature of one's own filters and participation.

MICHAEL PERRY was looking for the nexus implied in the title of the seminar. If the universe is one, then the elements within it should not be incommensurable: we should be seeking a unity of explanation. He suggested that we needed a picture of a hierarchy of complexity where we used the appropriate level of explanation. The higher level does not invalidate the lower. He questioned the range of our current explanations and felt that we needed to extend our causal reach into the fifth dimension and beyond. In this context he remarked that the words dimension, frequency and vibration were all analogies. In the discussion Peter Fenwick suggested that mystical experiences did indeed point towards the existence of a transcendent reality beyond measurement of brain states. The problem for modern science is that it is kept within a closed loop by its defining assumptions. Max Payne wondered if a coherence rather than correspondence theory of truth was called for and asked about the exact manner of cross-coherence. The theme of coherence was further developed to include the enhanced perception reported in mystical and near-death experiences, especially in relation to beauty, light and love.

In our final discussion we formulated a number of seed thoughts for wider consideration. These are printed below and will be fed into the consciousness email discussion list along with some individual statements and this report. If this all sounds rather dry and abstract, I

should correct this impression by stressing the warmth and depth of exchange among the participants. This was enhanced by the generous hospitality and loving concern of our hostess, COUNTESS ANGELIKA CAWDOR. We are enormously grateful to her and to the Epiphany Philosophers Trust, who funded the meeting.

Seeds for further discussion

1. Science is ideally a system of hypotheses and a self-critical and critically self-aware pursuit of truth
2. The current metaphysical assumptions of science as postulated by 'scientism' are valid in their own terms but are not sufficient to give us the basis for a complete account of reality.
3. Scientific empiricism needs to be broadened and deepened to include data from transcendent experience.
4. Scientific values such as honesty and accuracy underpin science but are rarely articulated. In this context, knowledge itself is a value.
5. Knowledge of the history of science and medicine makes us less sure of our current certainties.
6. All intellectual frameworks have their limits, and influence our interpretation of evidence.
7. Reality is a holarchy of complexities where we need to use an appropriate level of explanation at each level. Different levels of explanation need to be coherent with each other.
8. Consciousness is correlated with brain processes but cannot necessarily be reduced to them.
9. Knowledge obtained from transcendent experience informs our understanding of the different levels of reality.
10. Insight into reality is obtained in a process in which the fullest experience informs understanding and understanding points in the direction of ever deeper experience.
11. A science of consciousness requires a participatory rather than a manipulative approach.
12. A science of consciousness includes a process of self-development and should address the nature and relationship between primary and secondary qualities.

All of us agree with some of these statements, but perhaps none of us with all of them!