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Vision

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Ron Brady, Sugarloaf, New York

The conference was held in the pleasant environs of King Alfred's College, within the rather spectacular medieval city of Winchester. Ancient, winding streets that seemed to lead toward ever-greater mysteries rewarded any brief walk from the college toward the Cathedral. And all walks somehow brought one to the grounds of the Cathedral, the obvious centre of the whole valley.

The theme of this conference was *Vision*, and in keeping with the programme of the series, the complementary insights that mystical and scientific approaches could bring to the subject. 'Vision,' of course, implies more than one thing. It suggests physical sight, but also imaginative grasp ("such is his vision"). I may be a visionary because I have new ideas, but also because I am clairvoyant and literally see 'visions'. In certain contexts it can also suggest understanding, perhaps the most important usage due to the epistemological implications. All of these meanings were at play in the conference discussions.

DAVID LORIMER began the conference Friday night with a talk titled "Seeing with the Eye of the Heart", in which he examined carefully chosen passages from mystical writings of the middle ages, drawing out their implications that the mind of spiritual understanding "sees" things invisible to less prepared minds. By "see" I mean here an interplay between understanding and perception in which the former is a necessary condition for the latter.

Although we do not always credit the insight, most readers will have noticed that a trained sensibility can perceive aspects of phenomena that an untrained one might miss. Developing this notion, it follows that the contribution of the mind is necessary to what we see. The more insightful this contribution, the wider the range of sight-i.e., we can perceive (in all senses of that word) only as much as our understanding allows.

The texts that David explored reported a seeing enriched by spiritual understanding, the development of which leads, eventually, to what early theology knew as the "knowledge of the things of God". Some of these witnesses implied an interplay between seeing and knowing that actually threatened to collapse the distinction between the two. This direction of thought goes back to early Greek philosophy, which found in 'knowing'-the state that grasped not only the idea but the necessary truth of the idea-a form of cognition which depended upon nothing else but its own activity-that is, a spiritual seeing. As such it was a participation in divine activity. Meister Eckhart appears to inherit that insight when he writes "God and I are one in the act of knowing."

Saturday morning began with DR. LEONARD SHLAIN'S video presentation of the thesis of his book: "The Alphabet vs. The Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image." The tape, like the book, is fast moving, lucid, and exciting. Dr. Shlain's presentation allows his audience to feel as if they participated in the very act of discovery that he is describing at the time. But unfortunately this ease of understanding, which has made the book a best-seller, is gained at the cost of a somewhat sketchy presentation.

Dr. Shlain argues that the old Mother-goddesses, guardians of life and fertility, were replaced, at a certain point in history, by patriarchal father Gods who were a good deal more military minded. His thesis is that this replacement reflects the change of consciousness brought about by displacement of the image, previously the major vehicle of communication, by the written word. The notion is, as Dr. Shlain admits, inspired by the work of Marshall McLuhan, but it also owes a great deal to theories of left and right brain function.

That our relation to meaning in the image is quite different from our relation in the written word seems correct, and any examination of the difference would be instructive. Dr. Shlain produces a far ranging discussion in the video, and a much longer one in the book, but both seem to beg the same questions.

To begin with the video's interesting treatment of the ancient Gods appears to result from a somewhat casual reading of the ancient texts. It is difficult to see how he arrives at his conclusions about their nature and places. It is also difficult to see how he can argue, as he must, that the ancient deities were inventions of the human imagination, when ancient peoples could not comprehend any notion of human creativity and acted as if they were passive to divinity.

For the writers of the ancient texts, the evolution of the Gods was the doing of the Gods. To suggest that the changes in the families of Gods were brought about by the adoption of writing implies a great deal about such Gods-in particular, it derives them from human psychology, as we understand the term today. That they should be so derived is not argued in the video but simply taken for granted. Yet even in Jungian psychology such Gods would be "*autonomous* powers of the psyche", not to be controlled by human conditions.

If one proposes that the medium of human communication is the transcendent factor, recasting human consciousness and thus its symbols of divinity as well, it should be possible to explain why the same evidence cannot be interpreted in reverse-why the change in the Gods was not the power the recast human consciousness and thus its mode of communication. This would be the testimony of the ancient writers. I would like to see the point argued.

PROFESSOR RICHARD GREGORY, one of the deans of perception theory, presented the next session. Gregory is known as a "constructionist" theorist-that is, one who proposes that perceived appearances are a construction of the human mind and sense organs. During the presentation his slides gave an ample demonstration of what he might mean by this. Ambiguous figures allowed the viewer to see them in more than one way. Others-more traditional "optical illusions", were consistently seen in a counter-factual manner-i.e., two lines of equal length could not be seen as such. (Muller-Lyer or arrow illusion) Gregory began an investigation of how the human constructive activity could result in these and like phenomena, inferring from the explanations the manner in which all phenomena are constructed.

Optical illusions may be misleading to the individual who is not familiar with them, but they are a special case, and to suggest that perceptual appearances are constructed by an active human subject is not to imply that they provide false reports of the world. Nor, in fact, does Gregory suggest this. Rather he argues that a good deal of basic wisdom goes into the construction of such appearances, and if this were not the case we would not be able to

'see' size and shape constancy as perspective changed, or for that matter, color constancy as the illuminant changed. Yet we can do these things, and due to our skill we 'see' a *stable* world, which is presumably its true condition. Of course, we do not usually 'see' ourselves going about the seeing. We look at what is seen, not at the process by which we see it. But Gregory's examination turns things around, and we begin to watch ourselves seeing. In particular, to catch the small but important judgments by which we frame the visual field with a context of understanding, and in so doing turn that field into a set of visible-i.e., intelligible phenomena-rather than a "buzzing, blooming confusion."

The next talk was "Vision and Super-Vision: Perspectives from Inside the Image", by DR. MARIE ANGELO, and whether due to good planning or serendipity it capitalized very well on the presentations of David Lorimer and Richard Gregory by showing how medieval images could progressively be illuminated by following the lines of their iconography. Dr. Angelo would present the slide of an alchemical image and then begin reading its symbolism. Then by a meditation on the function of that symbolism in the image she would show that rather than being 'explained' by a reading of the symbolism, the riddle of the image would deepen, growing more alive to the viewer's probing.

Presumably this is what was meant by the perspective "from inside". When viewed without commentary these images are mysterious, but too much so, quite resistant to penetration. As we begin to gain a familiarity with their language, the meanings of the symbols interact, and we literally 'see' a different picture, because the drama of interaction is different. As the meditation on an image progresses, the production of new meaning begins to appear self-sustaining, and the mind is led continually onward, and inward, due to the emergent relations continually being born. Each meditation broke off when the speaker judged prudent-when, perhaps, she thought she had done enough to reproduce the interpretive dialogue between image and viewer in her audience.

Alchemic meditation techniques seem to centre upon the image, natural or artificial, and the powers within it. The presentation was a very interesting and very successful introduction to the manner in which the traditional images of alchemic texts can lead to a meditative experience.

The first talk on Sunday morning was given by DR. PETER FENWICK, titled "Dreams and Visions: A Neurophysiological and Psychospiritual Understanding." In it Dr. Fenwick provided rather vivid descriptions of dream, vision, and related states, and then examined brain activity for correlations. Of course, correlations do not explain causal relations, and Dr. Fenwick did not propose that brain data "explained" any mental states. Rather he was concerned with the types of correlations that could be found.

By matching the brain activity of a subject to the subject's own experiential report, or to known stages of sleep (i.e., REM sleep), Dr. Fenwick was able to identify specific patterns for each stage, which patterns are repeated by other subjects. From this evidence he concluded that all mental states are correlated with some specific type of brain activity, and either may be used to predict the other-that is, the brain state may predict what subjective state the subject is in, or the subjective state may be used to predict the brain activity.

To a later question about near-death reports from subjects who have survived the experience, Dr. Fenwick pointed out that "total brain silence" followed very quickly upon the cessation of blood flow, and thus if a mental state was experienced at such a time it would

have no brain correlate. Unfortunately however, the reports in question were as yet too anecdotal to establish the existence of such a state.

Editorial note: Ron's report covers as much of the conference as he was able to attend. On Saturday evening the first talk was given by CLIVE HICKS, who gave a wonderful slide and text presentation on the deeper meaning of Chartres, illustrated with his own slides. It was a remarkable experience since the quality of both word and image was outstanding. Then we had a bardic presentation with poet JAY RAMSAY with harpist FRED HAGENEDER and singer VIJAYA. It was an inspiring evening and brought a fresh angle on the subject. Earlier in the afternoon Jay gave a seminar expounding his own creative process and illustrated with some of his poems. ANNE BANCROFT gave a talk on 'The Luminous Vision' in which she discusses the views of two mediaeval and one modern mystic (this is available under Members' Articles). The last talk on Sunday was given by THETIS BLACKER on 'The Phoenix Eye: Visionary Experience and Art'. Using her own paintings, Thetis vividly evoked their visionary basis and had the audience spellbound.

Audio tapes were made of all the conference presentations (the Shlain video is available from the office - see Network News) and details can be obtained from Philip Royall on 01453 766411 or email confcass@lineone.net