

## **“Mind, Soul, World: Consciousness in Nature”**

A Templeton Colloquium at the NDIAS

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March 14-15, 2016

104 McKenna Hall

### **Introduction to the Colloquium and the Book**

The occasion of this colloquium is a book project on the nature of consciousness and the metaphysics of the soul; and project and colloquium alike have been financed by the Templeton Foundation (through NDIAS), as one of many subventions for research on “the place of mind within nature.” As far as that designation goes, however, one of my aims is to invert its terms and argue that the mystery of consciousness is better approached by an inquiry into the place of nature within mind. The conclusion toward which I am working is, quite frankly, one of “theistic idealism” (using that phrase in as generously compendious a way as possible). My overarching argument is that consistently physicalist emergentist accounts of the origins of consciousness invariably fail; that scrupulous reflection on the nature of consciousness yields a picture to which certain classical understandings of the soul (Western and Eastern) are far better suited than is any kind of materialist reductionism; that these understandings of the soul inevitably entail a concept of the soul as having its ground and end in infinite divine mind, and as indeed being essentially an instance of restricted participation in the unrestricted consciousness of God; that the irreducibly transcendental orientation of intentional consciousness becomes intelligible only when seen in light of this transcendent reality; and that ultimately, perhaps, it is necessary to conclude that consciousness and being are inseparable, because in God they perfectly coincide. That, at least, is the grand design; but the discrete steps by which it will unfold will be fairly modest to begin with, and I hope sufficiently rigorous throughout.

In any event, I have organized the colloquium around certain of the book’s guiding themes, in a sequence vaguely similar to the book’s plan, but only as a convenient way of arranging the conversation. These are offered merely as points of departure, indicating my special areas of interest. I would not presume to suggest (though I might meekly hope) that the colloquium participants shape some of their remarks around my preoccupations. And I ask the participants’ pardon for so condensed and at times cryptic description of these themes.

#### I. The Problems with a Materialist Reduction of Consciousness

I should first note that, when I speak of “consciousness,” I mean more or less the entirety of mental life. Quite often, philosophy of mind, especially in Anglophone scholarship, limits the term to the issue of mental qualia or phenomenal subjectivity, usually under the assumption that if this—the one true “hard question”—can be satisfactorily resolved, every other question will prove easily amenable to a mechanical or functional or genetic explanation. To me, this seems exorbitantly wrong. At least, from a truly physicalist perspective, no less baffling than qualitative awareness is the

semiotic structure of human thought (which seems impossible to reduce to something like computational algorithms); or the qualitative abyss between the logical sequences of rational thinking and the electrochemical sequences of neurology; or the mind's capacity for abstraction; or the necessarily prior presence of thought's transcendental conditions within every moment of empirical experience; or the unified field of awareness, which seems to arise from an indivisible subjective simplicity; or (perhaps the problem of problems) mental intentionality. And I do not even have any clear sense which of these problems are the more basic or original. For instance, I am not sure it is coherent to think of phenomenal qualia as subsisting in anything other than an always already intentional act of the mind (is there ever such a thing as a phenomenon without form?)

Of course, as inheritors of a picture of reality shaped by the mechanistic metaphysics of early modernity, many theorists of mind face an altogether preposterous dilemma when they attempt to make sense of the reality of intentional consciousness. Within the mechanical narrative, matter is mindless mass, and physical causality mindless force, and so the appearance of causal powers in, say, conceptual abstractions or volitions or purposes creates a theoretical problem that seems to allow of only two possible solutions: either some version of Cartesian dualism (in which the body is a machine centrally operated by the immaterial homunculus of the "soul") or a thoroughgoing mechanical monism (in which mind or "soul" is an emergent result or epiphenomenon of unguided physical events). And naturally many materialist philosophers or neuroscientists assume that, if they can only dispose of the Cartesian soul once and for all, they will have by default established the supremacy of the physicalist position; and assume also that to accomplish this they need only find instances in which the brain operates without immediately conscious supervision on the part of any purely rational and cognizant agency within—moments when the homunculus appears to be asleep at the controls—for then they will have proved that everything, mind included, is only a form of mechanism after all, and no Wonderful Wizard is to be found on the other side of the screen pulling the levers. But the mechanistic paradigms within which they operate condemn them to an inescapable choice: if they are not to believe in a ghost mysteriously animating a machine then they must make themselves believe in a machine miraculously generating a ghost.

## II. Can Consciousness Evolve or Emerge from Matter?

Both in philosophy of mind (probably as an evasion) and in the cognitive sciences (usually by inadvertence) the problem of providing a coherent structural account of consciousness in physicalist terms is often addressed by an attempt to devise a plausible genetic account of the origins of consciousness, either evolutionary or physiological. But obviously such accounts, in addition to being incorrigibly conjectural, are largely irrelevant to the problem. Attempts at the rational reconstruction of consciousness from a material basis generally yield theories regarding correlations between brain events and mental acts, but no plausible causal narrative to mediate between the correlates; or yield theories about integrated "information" that tacitly and inexplicably conflate subjective awareness and objective data; or yield some other set of theories at a tangent from the actual dilemma. And all too often an evolutionary narrative is invoked as the sole explanation of how the third-person objectivity of material events could invert itself in

the first-person vantage of conscious mind. But, of course, a structural paradox cannot be resolved by a genetic narrative; the problem can at best be deferred to some earlier episode in the tale, in the hope that eventually it will disappear from view altogether in the mists of the epic or mythic prehistory of the species. And the matter is certainly made no clearer by talk of “emergent properties” in complex organisms that are “irreducible” to the properties of those organisms’ constituent parts. While it is true that complex wholes typically possess properties different in kind from those possessed by their parts, those differences must still logically be reducible to those ingredient properties. Otherwise, an appeal to emergence would not be conspicuously different from an appeal to magic.

### III. Intentionality and the Transcendental Ends of Consciousness

As I say, I suspect there is no greater difficulty for a physicalist account of consciousness than intentionality. According to the mechanical narrative, at any rate, nature is intrinsically devoid of final causality. And yet mental intentionality is not only irreducibly teleological; it is nothing but teleology. The physical reality that impinges upon our organs of perception is just a limitless ocean of causal sequences. Our intentionality, by contrast, is limited, “aspectual,” meaningful, and integrated. It is the mind’s always active capacity for “aboutness,” that essential purposiveness by which it thinks, desires, believes, means, represents, wills, imagines, or orients itself towards a specific end, present in every act of the conscious mind. It is what allows for conscious meaning, for references to or propositions about or representations of anything. In all consciousness, the intending mind invests perception with meaning by directing itself towards a certain determinate content of experience. Physical reality, however, according to the mechanistic picture, is intrinsically devoid of purpose, determinacy, or meaning; it is not directed towards any ends at all, it has no final causes, it cannot intend anything.

My interest in intentionality, however, goes beyond the apparent mechanical anomaly it represents. It is the axis upon which my larger argument will turn, and in fact turn about from a critical analysis of philosophy of mind to a constructive metaphysical proposal. I am especially interested in what I take to be the irreducibly transcendental structure of every intentional act of the mind: not only the mind’s orientation toward specific finite ends, but also its always prior orientation toward fully transcendental terms in whose light those more limited ends become available to thought and desire. And I mean “transcendental” in its classical and mediaeval, not merely Kantian, acceptation: not merely the regulative a priori conditions of all experience (which then also set the limits of metaphysical conjecture at the boundaries of the empirical), but truth, goodness, beauty, being, the one (which lie objectively beyond the bounds of nature, and only thus give nature to reflection). A scrupulous phenomenology of consciousness is enough to show that consciousness is not merely a passive reflection of reality “out there,” but a dynamic movement of the mind toward the real. The world is intelligible to us because we reach out towards it, or reach beyond it, coming to know the endless diversity of particular things within the embrace of a more general and abstract yearning for a knowledge of truth as such, and by way of an aboriginal inclination of the mind towards reality as a comprehensible whole. Knowledge is born out of a natural longing for the ideal intelligibility of all things, a final infinite horizon of knowledge that is nothing less than the whole of being. Even our most ordinary acts of cognition organize and take hold

of the world because the intellect has a certain natural compulsion that exceeds the individual objects of awareness. All concretely limited aspirations of the rational will are sustained within formally limitless aspirations: no finite end is ever desirable in itself, but only by reference to that final transcendental end in whose light that finite object can be recognized and judged.

Moreover, this vocation of the mind to absolute ends is no more a simple psychological state than the unity of consciousness is a simple condition of psychological integrity; in both cases, what is at issue is a transcendental condition of thought, which is logically prior to the finite identity and impulses of the ego. The vanishing point of the mind's inner coherence and simplicity is met by the vanishing point of the world's highest values; the gaze of the apperceptive "I" within is turned towards a transcendental "that" forever beyond; and mental experience, of the self or of the world, takes shape in the relation between these two "extra-natural" poles. The rational mind is able to know the world as a whole because it has always already, in its intentions, exceeded the world. Consciousness contains nature, as a complete and cogent reality, because it has always gone beyond nature, and can understand and judge because it is obedient to absolute values that appear as concrete realities nowhere within the physical order. By their transcendence of all finite conditions, they give us a world. And even the empirical self, the psychological individual, is itself only part of nature as it occurs in the interval between these transcendental poles.

#### IV. The Classical Metaphysics of the Soul

As I have said, most debates in philosophy of mind over the logical solvency of a physicalist account of mind, as well as most neuroscientific theories regarding the relation of the brain to mental activity, are conducted in terms of the relative plausibility of either a materialist monism or a Cartesian dualism (any idealism is entirely ruled out in advance, however, on the grounds that, well, no one thinks that way anymore, and what we do now must by definition be more advanced than what they did then). As it happens, I am not interested in producing a merely genealogical—and so largely elegiac—treatment of the rise of the modern picture of the self, as either a ghost or a ghostly algorithm. Descartes is not even the villain of the tale for me; rather, he was the first thinker clearly to recognize that, if we start from a truly mechanistic vision of the material order, devoid of eminent causes (formal or final), then it is not merely *rational* intellect that seems to constitute something exceptional or even alien within nature, but rather the whole of mental existence, from the faintest glimmer of qualitative consciousness to the most refined abstractions of speculative reason. While it is regrettable that he adopted the mechanical narrative quite as credulously as he did, and was willing to consign even animals to the realm of unconscious mechanism, still Descartes properly recognized that the modern picture of material nature simply fails in its own terms to account for the possibility of consciousness (phenomenal, intentional, and unified) as such.

Things were, of course, much simpler for the best thinkers of antiquity or the Middle Ages, before body and soul had been divorced from one another—the former reduced to an intrinsically mindless mechanism, the latter to an intrinsically disembodied

rational substance—and then forced to work out their differences under terms of settlement dictated by an unsympathetic metaphysical court. Certainly neither Platonists, nor Aristotelians, nor Stoics, nor any of the Christian metaphysicians of late antiquity or the Middle Ages could have conceived of matter as something independent of “spirit,” to which spirit was something simply superadded in living beings. Certainly none of them thought of either the body or the cosmos as a machine merely organized by a rational force from beyond itself, inasmuch as they were disposed to see matter as being always already informed by indwelling rational causes, and thus open to—and in fact directed towards—mind. Nor could Platonists or Aristotelians or Christians really conceive of spirit as being immaterial in a privative sense, in the way that a vacuum is not aerial or a vapor not a solid, rather than as being more substantial, more actual, more “supereminently” real than matter, belonging properly to that prior and pervasive reality in which matter had to participate to be anything at all. The quandaries produced by early modern dualism, then—the notorious “interaction problem,” for example—simply did not exist, because no school conceived of the interaction between soul and body as a purely extrinsic *physical* alliance between two disparate kinds of substance. The material order is only, one might say, an ontologically diminished or constricted effect of the fuller actuality of the spiritual order. Not even Platonic tradition (despite the tendency of contemporary Anglophone philosophers to equate it with Cartesianism) regarded the soul as a pure intellect presiding over the automaton of the body; rather, it conceived of the soul as the body’s life, spiritual and organic at once, comprising the appetites and passions no less than rational intellect; and saw the body as a material reflection of a rational and ideal order. Matter, for the most part, was not conceived of as simply the inert and opaque matter of mechanistic thought; rather, it was seen as a mirror of eternal splendors and verities, truly (if defectively) predisposed to the light of spirit. And, of course, for pagans, Hellenistic Jews, and Christians alike, the soul was the source and immanent entelechy of corporeal life, encompassing every dimension of human existence: animal functions and abstract intellect, sensation and reason, emotion and ratiocination, flesh and spirit, natural aptitude and supernatural longing.

In any event, it would be well if those engaged in contemporary debates were better acquainted with the vast conceptual difference of premodern concepts of soul and intellect from the Cartesian model they know (or almost know). In my book, I shall devote considerable space to Aristotelian, Platonic (or Neoplatonic), and even Stoic understandings of the mind, and of its relation not only to corporeal life but to the indwelling rationality of the cosmos and the “noetic” or “intelligible” nature of God, as well as to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim revisions thereof. (I shall also draw on a great number of Asian sources, *vide infra*). Again, I would not presume to suggest how the colloquium participants should approach the matter; but, for myself, I am working toward a formulation along the lines of: the soul, from any number of classical vantages, ultimately coincides conceptually with existence itself; it is convertible with the very act of being. Or, rather: there is no such thing as the act of existence apart from the act of consciousness.

## V. Eastern Contributions to the Understanding of Consciousness

This is not a “theme” of the book or of the colloquium, but just a special set of resources. In part, my use of Asian sources in the book is simply an accident of biography, and reflects my earlier training in Asian religious and philosophical traditions, as well as my continued interest over the years. But in greater part it is the result of my conviction that certain philosophical and spiritual schools in the East provide remarkably rich materials for deeper reflections upon the mystery of consciousness, the structure of consciousness as an act, the relations between the “psychological” or “empirical” self and consciousness itself, the relation between mind and reality, and the relation between mind and God. Here, however, I am merely hoping the participants will draw on their considerable expertise to send the conversation (and my reflections) in as many promising directions as possible, and perhaps to issue some salutary warnings against venturing down paths that lead in less promising directions. And I hope they will draw as liberally as they like from Subcontinental, Tibetan, and East Asian sources (the more shamelessly idealist the better).

At present, for what it is worth, I see my book as in many ways—albeit distinctive ways—affirming the Mahavakyas of the Upanishads: *ayam ātmā brahma, tat tvam asi, prajñānam brahma...even aham brahmāsmi*. (Though it is worth noting that my predilections and readings are much more vishishtadvaitin than advaitin, and that I generally distrust Vedanta unleavened by a sufficient amount of Bhakti; I am a Christian, after all.) And much of my reading at the moment concerns the relation of Atman to Jiva, and of either to both Brahman and Jagat, in the thought of Śankara, subsequent advaita thinkers (I lean much more toward Vivaraṇa than toward Bhāmatī schools, at least as a general rule), Ramanuja, and various Yogācāra Buddhist thinkers; I am especially interested in understandings of Atman as pure reflexive consciousness, prior to individuation of any kind, in both Vedantic and certain Yogācārin sources (I am thinking of Kamalaśīla, who quite unproblematically uses “atman” in that sense—though I suppose he might also be considered as much an exponent of Madhyamika as Yogācāra). But, again, my current research is not the issue; my larger interest is in the discovery within consciousness of a ground in Atman that is not the psychological self but an original participation in the divine mind, Brahman, in which all lives and moves and has its being. Which leads me to:

## VI. The Soul and the Whole of Being

Here I must be as concise and synoptic as possible, so as to avoid attempting to lay out a very long argument. Take (or ignore) these remarks as vague gestures in the direction of my project.

If, as I have said, the whole of what we call nature is what we know as the interval between two transcendental realities—the apperceptive unity of intentional consciousness and the teleological universality of being as total intelligibility—then the natural order comes to pass for us between two poles that cannot be fitted within the naturalist picture. The logical and ontological priority of neither admits of a materialist dissolution, and yet the material order is constituted as an intelligible totality by the relation between them. The continuum of nature is broken open at both ends, so to speak. Not only is

metaphysical conjecture beyond the empirical licit here; it is the very structure of thought, the primordial shape of all empirical knowledge. The phenomenal is already “metaphysical”; the very possibility of “nature” is a “super-natural” dispensation. Moreover, if (speaking gnoseologically) the foundation of intuition and conception is the necessary relation of intentional consciousness to the whole of being as its final end, it is only rational to ask whether this *ordo cognoscendi* is an inversion of the *ordo essendi*, a glimpse of (speaking ontologically) transcendent being as the source and ground of consciousness: to ask, that is, whether the transcendental structure of thought necessarily opens out upon the transcendent fullness of being.

Of course, it is an old metaphysical puzzle whether being and consciousness are entirely severable concepts: whether it is even coherent to imagine that something could exist in such a manner that it could not be perceived or thought about in any way at all, not even by itself, even in principle—in what sense would it be distinct from absolute nothingness? At the very least, it certainly seems reasonable to say that being is manifestation, that real subsistence is revelation, that to exist is to be perceptible, conceivable, knowable, and that to exist fully is to be manifest to consciousness. Certainly the phenomenal world we inhabit—the reality we find represented or reflected in or informing our thoughts, in which intensities and densities and durations and successions are arranged in such magnificently complex but diverse order—exists only as an “artifact” of intentional consciousness. But I shall also argue that there is almost certainly a point at which being and intelligibility become conceptually indistinguishable. If nothing else, it is only as an intelligible order, as a coherent phenomenon (sensible or intellectual), that anything is anything at all, whether an elementary particle or a universe; perhaps it is true that only what could in principle be known can in actuality exist. So, at any rate, we have to believe. The rational desire to know the truth of things, in every sphere, is sustained by a tacit faith in some kind of ultimate coincidence or convertibility between being and consciousness. The natural orientation of the mind towards a horizon of total intelligibility requires us to venture our time, our hopes, our labors, and our contentions on the assumption that rational thought and coherent order are two sides of a single reality, or at least somehow naturally fitted to one another. If we believe that the structure of reality can truly be mirrored in the structure of our thinking, then we must also believe that there is an ideal or purely intelligible dimension of reality that really corresponds to the categories and concepts that allow us to understand the world. There is such a wonderful transparency of the world to thought, and a wonderful power of thought to interpret reality coherently through forms and principles of an entirely noetic nature, that we cannot help but believe that being in itself is pure intelligibility.

If none of this is an illusion, and if in fact world and mind really are open to one another in this way, then perhaps for just this reason we should accord a certain causal priority to mind over matter in our picture of reality. If the materialist understanding of nature were correct, it would be difficult enough to account for the existence of consciousness; but it would be far more difficult to say how consciousness, in all its exorbitant difference from the purposeless welter of physical causality, could actually capture the truth of physical reality in the exquisite trammels of its concepts. Yet it certainly seems that, in abstracting experience into various kinds of ideal content—

formal, mathematical, moral, aesthetic, and so on—the mind really does extract knowledge from what would otherwise be nothing but meaningless brute events. In fact, reality becomes more intelligible to us the more we are able to abstract it into concepts, and to arrange it under categories, and then to arrange our concepts under ever simpler, more comprehensive, more unconditioned concepts, always ascending towards the simplest and most capacious concept our minds can reach. To say that something has become entirely intelligible to us is to say that we have an *idea* of it that can be understood according to the simplest abstract laws and that leaves no empirical or conceptual remainder behind. This being so, it makes perfect sense that so many ancient and mediaeval philosophers appear to have assumed that the ideal dimension of things, their intrinsic intelligibility, was not only a property of their existence, but in some sense was identical with existence itself. What is an idea, however, other than the expression of a rational intentionality? And how, therefore, could being be pure intelligibility if it were not also pure intelligence? At least, Bernard Lonergan’s long, involved argument that the “unrestricted intelligibility” of reality leads thought to God as the one “unrestricted act of understanding,” is one I find convincing better than half the time. As the mind moves towards an ever more comprehensive and “supereminent” grasp of reality, it necessarily moves towards an ideal level of reality at which intelligibility and intelligence are no longer distinguishable. The mind can be a true mirror of objective reality because we assume that objective reality is already a mirror of mind. The ascent towards ever greater knowledge is, if only tacitly and *contre cœur*, an ascent towards an ultimate encounter with limitless consciousness, limitless reason, a transcendent reality where being and knowledge are always already one and the same, and so inalienable from one another.

I can also admit that I am largely persuaded by Karl Rahner’s claim that the transcendental experience present in all “categorical” or finite experience is implicitly an experience of the infinite, of the final horizon of all intentionality as nothing less than the divine fullness of being. I would be content to say that all consciousness, at least structurally, is a relation to God as end, or even that teleologically the mind is God, insofar as it strives not only *toward*, but necessarily *to become*, infinite consciousness of infinite being. (That, incidentally, is one of the principal senses in which I shall attempt to affirm the Mahavakyas in my book.) My guiding conviction is that the most scrupulous phenomenology of the act of consciousness itself, reducing consciousness both to its origin and its end—all that precedes and exceeds the empirical, all that founds and elicits consciousness, the whole movement of thought in which the phenomenal world of things subsists—ultimately leads in either case to the same place, the same simplicity; that which is most within and that which is most beyond: God knowing God, in which all finite consciousness participates as a restricted instance of that unrestricted act.

In any event, again, this is only a survey of my preoccupations, lacking in both clarifying details and clarifying orderliness; it is not a suggested program for the discussions ahead. I can only say, in parting, that I know where my argument in the book will end (mostly in the company of the mystics).

If indeed to exist is to be manifest—to be intelligible and perceptible—and if to exist fully is to be consciously known, then God, as infinite being, is also an act of infinite knowledge. He is in himself the absolute unity of consciousness and being, and so in the realm of contingent things is the source of the fittedness of consciousness and being each to the other, the one ontological reality of reason as it exists both in thought and in the structure of the universe. Thus, when one looks inward, towards that vanishing point of unity that makes the whole of mental life possible, one looks—as all contemplative traditions insist—toward the source and ground of the mind, the simplicity of God, the one ground of both consciousness and being. More inward to consciousness than consciousness itself is that “*scintilla dei*” or “*Fünklein Gottes*” that imparts life and truth to the soul, Sufism’s *sirr-ul-asrar* (secret of secrets) or divine indwelling at the heart of the soul, the Atman or nous or what have you; and the mind’s interior journey towards its own wellspring brings it to a place where it finds itself utterly dependent upon the sublime simplicity of God’s knowledge of all things in his knowledge of himself. And thus also, when one looks outward, towards the world, one looks towards that same source, that same unity of being and intelligibility. So, whether one looks outward or inward, the soul looks upon the soul; or, to say the same thing from the opposite angle, being looks upon being; and thus—in either case—one encounters God in his self-disclosure.