Charles Whitehead

Rethinking Reality

Editor's Introduction

The Asia Consciousness Festival was a particularly refreshing experience for me, because in Hong Kong you are surrounded by people who have known, since the days of Lao Tzu and Confucius, that selfhood is a social construct. In western philosophy, on the other hand, social understandings of the self are no older than Hegel, and are still not widely recognised. Quite prominent figures in consciousness studies — people whose names, so to speak, are on everyone's lips — still do not appear to know what is meant by, let alone see the relevance of, a social approach to consciousness. And, according to research by Imants Barušs (2008), this is unlikely to change in the near future, because those engaged in our field tend to ignore what does not reinforce their predisposed beliefs. This is something of a paradox. It has been repeatedly pointed out — particularly in debates during the 1990s (Whitehead, 2004) — that the challenge of consciousness, like no other, requires a paradigmatic shift in the assumptions of western science. So where flexibility of opinion is most needed we find the greatest rigidity; and the open-mindedness which distinguishes the best scientific practice gives way to a kind of unreflecting fundamentalism.

I take comfort from the words of Ravi Ravindra who, in a recent workshop,[1] pointed out that great spiritual leaders — such as Confucius, Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed — never tried to win converts. They taught only 'those who have ears to hear' — those who have already realised something of the truth and are actively seeking further guidance. In a tradition attributed to Lao Tzu, a teacher would

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[1] 'Truth = Knowledge + Love', London, September 6, 2009.

only accept a student who could demonstrate commitment and significant prior advancement in realizing the Dao. I am not, of course, suggesting that any contributor to this volume is a great or even average spiritual leader (nor am I necessarily denying it in every case). I only wish to imply that 'preaching to the converted' is not a waste of time, and is in fact the only option. Perhaps, in the long run, the best we can do is trust the rest of humanity to learn for themselves the lessons of our very long and repetitive history.

However, just in case someone, by accident, has taken the wrong copy of *JCS* to the bathroom, and is now reading this by default, I will explain what I understand by a social approach to consciousness. Of course, all approaches to consciousness are social in the sense that all collaborative endeavours are social, by definition. But an approach calling itself social is one which overtly addresses social issues. I think there are three basic issues, and I polled the contributors to this volume to ask whether or not they agreed with these three statements:

1. The challenge of consciousness is such that it will not be resolved unless we take into account the social basis of self-consciousness.

2. The challenge of consciousness is such that it will not be resolved unless we take into account the social, cultural, and political conditions that make science possible and shape certain scientific assumptions.

3. A social approach to consciousness has ethical implications relevant to the creation of a truly just and civil society.

All ten principal authors responded. Their answers ranged from strong to — in one case — conditional agreement. The author who conditionally agreed felt that statements 1 and 3 did not go far enough, that 'self-consciousness' is understood differently by different people, and that the word 'social' may not be big enough to capture the deeper reality which consciousness might represent. In fact these objections raise a fourth issue — or rather, a corollary of issue 2 — which provides the theme for the final part of this collection, as well as the title of this introduction:

4. (or 2b). The 'hard problem' of consciousness demands a radical revision of our understanding of reality.

But in what sense might this be a 'social' issue? One reviewer of the last paper in this collection ('Beyond Scientific Materialism')

questioned whether it should be included in a volume on 'social approaches', and the author of that paper — Imants Barušs — himself suggests that the word 'social' is not big enough for the task. Since I was trained as a social scientist, no doubt this has predisposed me to emphasize, and perhaps inflate, the significance of sociality. However, a minimal definition of 'social' implies discrete entities which act collectively. In other words, there must be processes which separate, and processes which unite. Every organism is dependent on processes of integration and differentiation; and the structure of the universe as we know it is fundamentally dependent on forces of attraction and repulsion. To my mind there is a sense in which it is not unreasonable to think of all life, and the universe itself, as 'social'. I know many people will think I am over-stretching a metaphor here, but there is more to be said, and it relates to the very fabric of western culture — which is of course a social matter.

Darwinism assumes that biology is fundamentally competitive. But this is an error rooted in our western ideology of individualism, 'freedom', and *laissez faire* capitalism. Of course competition is an important aspect of biology, but without cooperation, there would be no competitors. Organisms may compete for a particular adaptive niche, but if we take an ecosystem as a whole, the life forms within it are interdependent. Alleles compete, but the genome is a cooperative system. Our bodies are societies of cooperating cells; our cells are societies of cooperating organelles, which are societies of cooperating molecules, made up of cooperating atoms, cooperating subatomic particles, and cooperating quanta. The word 'co-operating' literally means 'acting together'. If nothing pre-determined the Big Bang, why did it not spew out an arbitrary collection of tiny bananas and ball bearings? Why did we get a beautifully ordered spectrum of quantum particles, with exactly the right properties to create protons and neutrons, with exactly the right properties to create atoms, with exactly the right properties to form molecules, macromolecules, and ultimately the genetic code itself? By what principle did the Big Bang show such apparent foresight? Is the Watchmaker, after all, not as blind as biologists believe?

Humans are extraordinarily social creatures. Our minds are social. According to social mirror theory (Whitehead, 2001), without society there would be no minds — or at least minds which are self-aware. Our fundamentally social nature is rooted in the social nature of biology, which is itself rooted in a social principle which underpins everything that exists. The universe is fundamentally social. For those who still feel I am abusing that word, I will say something less

controversial: the universe is fundamentally biocentric. The anthropic cosmological principle, in its 'weak' form, recognises that all the constants of nature are not arbitrary but, with a remarkable degree of precision, exactly what is required to generate carbon-based life-forms including ourselves. Cosmologists may tell you that there is nothing remarkable about that — if things were otherwise we would not be here to marvel at it. This is rather like the Queen of England marvelling that, of 20 million or so British women, she is the one who became Queen. But I am not sure that the anthropic principle can be trivialized in this way. If you toss a coin a hundred times, and each time it lands on its edge, any reasonable person might suspect something is happening which demands an explanation. The cosmologists' reply to this says, in effect, that if you toss a coin an infinite number of times, sooner or later you must get a run in which the coin lands on its edge any number of times. The 'many worlds' hypothesis is not really a hypothesis in any scientific sense, since it cannot be tested, and it hardly conforms to Occam's razor. Multiplying the number of hypothetical universes — with no better reason than abhorrence of anything that might make life meaningful — looks more to me like the last ditch defence of an unsustainable worldview.

Physicalism holds that reality, at least in principle, can be entirely explained without invoking consciousness. This is a self-contradictory belief. If consciousness is part of reality, but is left out of account, how can any 'Theory of Everything' be complete? Certain extremists resort to denying that consciousness is 'real' — another last ditch defence of the indefensible. Physicalism has led others to conclude that consciousness cannot have evolved, because it cannot be an adaptation, since it cannot exert 'physical' effects. This was the conclusion reached by Steven Pinker, speaking at TSC 2004. As it happens he was contradicting his earlier claim (Pinker, 1997, p. 145) that toothache does not merely hurt — it causes us to complain and head for the dentist. But if we accept the physicalist assumption that consciousness cannot have evolved, then it must have been there from the Beginning — and not the beginning of life, since vitalism is denied, but the beginning of the universe. The philosopher Galen Strawson (2006) has likewise argued that physicalism logically implies panpsychism.

1. Self and Others

The four issues listed above are variously interwoven throughout the four parts of this collection. Part 1, for example, addresses social aspects of consciousness (issue 1). However, the three papers all have

further implications. Nevia Dolcini deals with the social nature of self- and other-consciousness at the level of 'theory of mind' (ToM) — that is, the ability to understand that behaviour is determined by mental states, including beliefs which may be false. There is a major current debate in cognitive science arising from recent research which challenges the orthodox belief that ToM first emerges in children around the age of four. Dolcini shows, using the tools of philosophical analysis, that there is no conflict in the data. Rather, the conflict is between the assumptions held by the scientists involved. If the same assumptions are applied to all the data — and it hardly matters what these assumptions are, so long as they are 'appropriate' — then the incongruities disappear. Her conclusion, in my view, suggests a need to examine the political conditions that generated cognitivism (issue 2).

The first and last papers in Part 1 go beyond the rather basic level of ToM research, addressing what the authors refer to respectively as 'social consciousness' and 'mindfulness'. The ethical implications of a social approach to consciousness (issue 3) have been largely implicit in previous presentations, but they are the central theme of these two papers. The first, by Marilyn Schlitz, Cassandra Vieten, and Elizabeth Miller, presents their research and development of an educational programme designed to enhance social consciousness, and so produce socially aware and socially constructive citizens. Their paper also presents a model of social consciousness and its development, which in effect provides a guide to the management of noetic experiences (otherwise known as 'exceptional', 'spiritual', or 'peak' experiences) — how to respond to and benefit from them in terms of self-development. Their extensive research on the co-development of social consciousness and worldview is of course directly relevant to issues 2 and 4 — the need for a new worldview in western science.

The educational strategy developed by Schlitz *et al.* might be described as the 'bottom up' approach to a better society. On the other hand, in the last paper, Janet McIntyre-Mills adopts the 'top down' approach, exploring the principles needed to assure accountability of government, participation of the governed, an equitable distribution of power, and a sustainable use of resources. Her ideas are likewise based on considerable research, much of it funded by the Australian Government. Her findings suggest that participation of itself can generate mindfulness. If so, this would also be expected to lead to a positive shift in worldview. The 'worldview literacy' of Schlitz *et al.*, and McIntyre-Mills's 'ethical literacy' are not so much two sides of one coin as the same thing approached from two directions, and it is surely

what we would all wish to achieve in the challenging circumstances of the twenty-first century.

2. Culture and the Embodied Self

If self-awareness is a social construct, then one would expect human culture to influence the way we think, what we can think about, and how we perceive ourselves, each other, and the world. Part 2 comprises two papers which address cultural influences on consciousness, with a particular emphasis on the way that cultural alterations of the body affect perceptions of personhood and reality. Camilla Power points out the fundamental discontinuity between animal and human displays, and introduces the theme of 'beauty magic' — the use of cosmetics to invoke the powers of an invisible 'otherworld'. The Puritan tradition, originating in north-western Europe, has created the impression that cosmetics are, at best, a relatively trivial aspect of life; and at worst, a rather contemptible expression of vanity. Camilla Power, however, points out that 'cosmetic' and 'cosmos' share a common root, and both words originally implied the creation of order out of chaos. Her 'Female Cosmetic Coalitions' model proposes that the earliest use of body paint played a central role in transforming our pre-cultural ancestors into fully modern humans with modern culture, modern consciousness, and collectivized intentionality. Her argument is illustrated by intriguing ethnographic observations, such as why, among the Dogon, 'To be naked is to be speechless'.

The paper by Charles Whitehead also notes the significance of human cooperation, and explains why this necessitates altered perceptions of self and reality. Whitehead also emphasizes the discontinuity between animal and human behaviour, and the effects on consciousness of cultural alterations of human bodies. He demonstrates some of the counter-intuitive aspects of animistic belief systems, and traces their evolution into the worldview of modern science. According to Whitehead, many of the unquestioned assumptions of scientists today reflect cultural falsification of self- and reality-perception, and this leads to false problems in science — most notably, the 'hard problem' of consciousness. So Part 2 takes us from social consciousness and its ethical consequences (issues 1 and 3) to the need to check sources of potential cultural bias in any scientific work, especially if it relates to human behaviour, human thought, or consciousness (issue 2).

3. The Self in Other Bodies (and Other Places)

The nature of social self-awareness takes a particularly fascinating turn in Part 3, with two papers on virtual embodiment in Second Life®; one on the need for embodiment in creating a self-aware machine, and one on the importance of place consciousness in out-of-body experiences.

Elif Ayiter gives a sensitive account of her own experiences in creating 'alts' — or multiple alternative selves — in Second Life®. Ayiter describes the discovery of 'other minds' which live secret lives within her own mind. Some of these virtual persons appear quite alien to her, and may never have made themselves known to her everyday self but for her work as an artist in virtual reality. Her observations can be added to an already significant body of evidence suggesting that normal human minds create imaginary persons with their own autonomy and self-aware minds (Oakley & Eames, 1985; Hilgard, 1986; Mitchell, 1994; Whitehead, 2001).

Gregory Garvey adopts a more clinical approach, comparing Second Life® experiences to conditions of dissociation, depersonalization, and derealisation, as defined in DSM-IV-TR (the current edition of the US standard psychiatric manual). Whilst two referees expressed reservations about such comparisons, they nevertheless recommended publication because Garvey's ideas are so thought provoking. However, it is not Garvey's intention to pathologize what appears to be normal playful behaviour in the context of virtual reality. He discusses boundary theory — the notion that we lead quite different lives in the domains of work, recreation, and family life. What I find particularly interesting about both these papers is that, by means of new technology, the authors have been enabled to independently discover the 'strange' and wonderful phenomena of 'theatre of mind' — our ability to run social scenarios in imagination, with 'toy people' who behave as though they have minds of their own. I put the word 'strange' in quotes here because the 'strangeness' is only apparent. It would seem that theatre of mind is in fact so familiar that — based on the many consciousness papers I have heard or read — scientists and even 'trained' phenomenologists seldom notice it. Yet it is well accepted that pretend play is essential to normal human development, and the ability to divide the mind is necessary for pretence — it is a survival imperative that what is perceived should be 'decoupled' from what is pretended (Leslie, 1987): a child pretending to be Superwoman should not attempt to fly from an upstairs window, or swallow stones which she is pretending are sweets. The ability of the brain to run

more than one mind in parallel is particularly evident in role-play, which is endemic in adult life. George Herbert Mead (1934/1974) first pointed out the theatrical nature of human social behaviour, and inspired Irving Goffman's (1959) classic *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. When we identify with the characters in a novel or movie, we are engaging in role-play, and such figures of fantasy and fiction may live in our minds more completely than we realise.

The other two papers in this section also explore the relationship of consciousness to embodiment and movement in space. Robin Zebrowski takes the theme into the world of 'strong AI' — the attempt to develop a machine with a human-like mind. She argues that a computer without a body cannot have a mind — because 'dialogue with the world', including social interaction, is a precondition for the possession of a mind. Phenomenology has often been used to criticise AI, but Zebrowski uses phenomenology to validate strong AI, finding a striking convergence between the views of Merleau-Ponty and the discoveries of robotics research.

Ornella Corazza, on the other hand, presents her research on 'out of body' experiences, comparing spontaneous with ketamine-induced 'near death' experiences (NDEs). She finds that these two kinds of experience do indeed have much in common, though they are by no means identical. The similarities have led some to propose that NDEs have a psychopharmacological origin, as opposed to others who take NDEs as evidence that the mind can leave the body, particularly at the point of death. Corazza, however, challenges both views, invoking the concept of 'place' (*basho*) in current Japanese philosophy. She notes that the sense of time may be suspended in NDEs, but never the sense of place. She takes space to be fundamental and inseparable from consciousness, and this requires a non-dualist conception of mind and body — the body having transcendent aspects which are not confined within our more mundane sense of a skin-bound self.

In sum, we find that a consideration of social mind and social body opens up questions relating to all four issues that I have mentioned above, including the theme of Part 4 — the need to rethink our concepts of consciousness and reality.

4. Rethinking Reality

Christopher Holvenstot argues that our beliefs about reality, whether materialist or spiritualist, are simply tools that we use in adapting ourselves to the contingencies of our biological, social, and cultural lives — tools which can be discarded when they have outlived their

function. Since mind and matter are virtually defined in opposition to each other, and the solidity of the material universe as understood by Copernicus and Newton is now a thoroughly outmoded concept, then the presumed 'insolidity' of consciousness is equally obsolete. Like Corazza, he rejects dualism. He makes the radical proposal that we should strip the way we think about consciousness of matter and spirit concepts entirely, in much the same way that matter concepts were formed by stripping the physical world of transcendental interpretations. In place of these outmoded concepts he suggests that consciousness could be described as 'a world-modelling function in nature'. I suspect (based on two enthusiastic peer reviews) that this idea may appeal to some transpersonal psychologists and noetic scientists, but perhaps not to those of other persuasions, and certainly not to physicalists. But that is not Holvenstot's main concern. More importantly, he intends to show that 'other frameworks of thought are possible and warranted'. His hypothesis, like others, is just a 'touchstone' — an aid to exploring the nature of consciousness *on its own terms*, to be discarded when it no longer serves its purpose.

Last but not least, the final paper in this collection — by Imants Barušs — argues, in parallel with Holvenstot, that as materialism cannot explain matter, neither can it explain consciousness. He describes materialistic science — or *scientism* — as 'inauthentic', and argues that nothing less than a transcendent theory will be adequate to explaining the place of consciousness in reality. He spells out the requirements that such a theory must meet and, as in the previous paper, recognises the ethical implications (issue 3). Where Holvenstot proposes a 'world-modelling function', Barušs emphasizes *intention*. He goes further, however — not only may consciousness be a primitive feature of the universe, it may also coincide with 'a pre-physical substrate, from which intention shapes both mental experience and physical manifestation'. A somewhat similar view was expressed by Stuart Hameroff at TSC 2004, illustrated by a slide showing an iceberg, whose tip represented the classical world of macro-phenomena created by quantum reduction, whilst the submerged bulk represented the timeless world of the 'quantum subconscious' — reminiscent of David Bohm's (1980) 'implicate order'. Barušs, however, is suggesting something deeper, prior even to — and determining — the quantum world.

Both papers in Part 4 address the fourth issue mentioned above — the need for a radical shift in the worldview of western science. Though neither author discusses the developmental psychology of social self-consciousness, they do overtly deal with the other two

issues — the culturally-determined ideology of western science, and the ethical implications of a realistic theory of consciousness (Barušs says such a theory should provide 'soteriological guidance'). In what I have written so far, I hope I have made clear how the four central issues within social approaches to consciousness are interwoven throughout this volume, and why social approaches have an important contribution to make to consciousness debates. However I have one thing further to add.

Social Approaches are Not an Option

A social approach to consciousness is not an *alternative* to other approaches. All approaches are social because science and philosophy are social projects, and all are likely to benefit from social analysis. I recently reviewed six keynote papers from TSC 2009 in order to demonstrate that social analysis is a useful adjunct to a wide variety of proposals (Whitehead, 2010). By examining the social implications of these six papers, it was possible to refine some of the arguments, expand their conclusions, or qualify predictions made on their basis. At the very least a social analysis proved (at least to me) interesting in its own right, and, I suggest, cannot be omitted without risk of overlooking important issues. Any exploration of social consciousness, as defined by Schlitz *et al.*, can only help to nourish a spirit of cooperation, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and recognition that the wellbeing of all depends on the way we all help and support each other.

During the workshop I mentioned earlier, Ravi Ravindra — who once held three professorships[2] at Dalhusie University — remarked, with a twinkle in his eye, on the way academics love tearing each other to pieces. Polemical exchanges in academia mean, in effect, that persons with different convictions accuse each other of being stupid. 'Stupid' is never an explanation. It is quite impossible that a stupid person could become an academic, though it is conceivable that an occasional distinguished professor might be relatively oblivious of the social processes that make his work possible and give meaning and value to his life. I used to tell my students that polemic has no place in science, even though I have been guilty of it myself. There cannot be debate without differences of opinion, and the study of consciousness in particular is one with no consensus concerning the nature of its subject, how it should be regarded, or how it might be

[2] In physics, comparative religion, and economic development.

integrated into a scientific understanding of reality. I do not necessarily agree with every single argument offered in this special issue of *JCS*, but it would be highly presumptuous of me to exclude an opinion for no better reason than my *feeling* that it is implausible. Our feelings about consciousness may be culturally determined and not at all trustworthy, and it would be highly premature to discount any approach to consciousness simply because it comes from an unexpected direction. Science is social, all approaches to consciousness are social, and consciousness itself is a social phenomenon — concerning processes of *acting together*. A social approach is worthwhile if it does no more than encourage cooperation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an attempt to understand those we disagree with.

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