

## I. Consciousness

The nature of consciousness is a central issue of philosophy and psychology and a major theme in Holotropic Breathwork, both didactically and experientially. This article briefly summarizes some theoretical perspectives on consciousness and suggests an approach that grounds consciousness in experience.

Theories about consciousness range from describing it as merely an epiphenomenon of matter – just an outcome of certain mechanical processes in the brain – to the other extreme, often called idealism: that consciousness is an absolute or supreme entity, and the material world is merely a manifestation or emanation of Consciousness. Each view dismisses the other as fundamentally illusory. For instance, if, as the materialists claim, consciousness is merely produced by the mechanical functioning of the brain, then it has no reality in and of itself. In this case the material process of the brain is the reality. Consciousness is just a byproduct, and human emotions are nothing but a play of atoms and molecules. On the other hand, if all is made of Consciousness, then matter is just a byproduct of Consciousness and the material world is illusory. From that point of view life and death are mere ripples in the ocean of Consciousness.

The final outcome of both perspectives is to deny very obvious events in human experience. When we stub a toe or bang into a table, the feeling of hurt is real. The materialists would say that the sensation of hurt is merely a mechanical disarray of atoms and molecules. But this perspective discredits the experience of the person who hurts. The view from the other extreme, that the material world is illusory and its vicissitudes fundamentally inconsequential, similarly dismisses the reality of a child's suffering or a mother's grief.

Rather than deny the realities of human experience to explain consciousness, we can take human experience as our starting point. The core of our experience is feeling. The simplest feelings are what we call sensory perceptions – sights, sounds, tastes, etc. Usually we think of feelings as more complex – pleasure, pain, love, jealousy – but these feelings share with sense perceptions the common and central characteristic that they are perceived subjectively and directly. We can extend this characterization of feeling to include mental perceptions, which we commonly call ideas. Usually we consider ideas as different from feelings, but this is a relatively modern attitude, resulting from Cartesian

science and its emphasis on “sense data.” For an example to counter the Cartesian bias, take the young child’s simple perception of fairness. It is direct and non-intellectual. Justice is a more complex perception, but still a feeling, just as the finely discriminated sensory perception of the perfume expert is a sophistication of ordinary feeling.

Feeling, then, spans a spectrum from sensory, or physical, to mental. The difference between the Cartesian scientist and the devotee of Supreme Consciousness concerns mainly which end of the spectrum of feeling each deems real: sensory experience or transcendental consciousness. Rather than claim one end of the spectrum is more real than the other, we can instead focus on what holds true for both cases: both in the realm of the senses and of the mind the veracity of perception depends on the directness and immediacy of how it is felt.

Given the centrality of feeling, we can then ask: what is the relation of consciousness to feeling? Consciousness is not a feeling, but rather a way that feelings are experienced. We experience feelings with different gradations of consciousness at different times. Consider the following examples. Each day a driver passes the same traffic signal. The day of his accident he fails to “see” it, even though the signal is in his field of vision. The aboriginal person and I both “see” the same patch of ground, but I am not conscious of the faint footprint. Many times I hear the same words, then one day I “see” their deeper meaning. Or I suddenly grasp, with deepened awareness, an idea like ecological interdependence.

Understanding consciousness as a *way* that feelings are experienced helps explain catharsis. When we revisit feelings of a traumatic event, as in Breathwork sessions, the support of the safe setting combined with the compassion of the facilitators and sitters allow us to bring forth and hold consciously feelings that we have long held unconsciously. As we know from Breathwork, we re-experience those buried feelings as vividly as the moment we first had them. The difference that provides catharsis is not that the feelings then and now are different. Rather, the difference is in the way we feel them – consciously instead of unconsciously.

The materialist sees consciousness as really nothing – just an epiphenomenon. The idealist contends the opposite: that Consciousness is fundamentally what everything is. In contrast to both these views, we can claim feeling as the fundamental reality and

explain consciousness as a quality of feeling. Consciousness, so described, is ironically nothing in and of itself – but it is not the “nothing” that materialism reduces consciousness to. It is more like the Nothingness Sartre describes that “lies coiled in the heart of Being – like a worm” (*Being and Nothingness*, Chap. 1, V).

This nothingness is very difficult to describe, and once described, has a way of vanishing before our very thoughts. It lies coiled as dynamically as the Kundalini snake, then strikes and hides as quickly as the flash of enlightenment. The poet Wallace Stevens observes that only someone who can appreciate the entirety of experience without emotional or intellectual preference is able to behold “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*The Snow Man*).

The mistake of the materialist is to turn consciousness into a non-existent nothing. The mistake of the idealist is to turn it into something supremely existent. Theories about consciousness range between these extremes. Each one generates its own set of beliefs, and its adherents proselytize insistently for our commitment. But which to choose? Amidst the confusion of so many theories of consciousness that limit reality to this or that, we can instead understand that consciousness is nothing that can be captured by an exclusionary approach. Instead, we can see that consciousness subjectively attends the entire spectrum of our feeling.

There are as many theories of psychotherapy as of consciousness. Instead of trying to choose between these many theories, we can focus on the reality of our own experience and explore ourselves, according to the basic suggestion of Holotropic Breathwork.

---

*Lenny Gibson ([gib@vermontel.net](mailto:gib@vermontel.net)) is a certified Holotropic Breathwork facilitator and holds Ph.D.'s in both philosophy and psychology. He welcomes comments, questions, and discussions on this article and other theoretical issues related to Holotropic Breathwork.*

*Pervasive in their influence on the thinking in this article, although not specifically cited, are the writings of Alfred North Whitehead and the writings, lectures, and discussions of Stan Grof.*