

Modern Science, Psychology, and the Enduring Mystery of Consciousness: An Esoteric/Mystical Critique, Part I

James Moffatt

Mysticism is . . . the admission of mystery in the universe. . . . If we were only what we seem to be to our normal self-awareness there would be no mystery; if the world were only what it can be made out to be by the perceptions of the senses and the analysis of reason, there would be no riddle. . . . In our rationalistic consciousness we are ignorant of ourselves because we know only that which changes in us from moment to moment and not that which is enduring; we are ignorant of the world because we are aware of its appearances and not its true being. Mysticism is opposed to the naturalism which categorically denies the existence of God and the dogmatism which talks as if it knew all about Him. Both agree in abolishing all mystery in the world. In his exaltation of scientific integrity the rationalist can at times be as vehement, as dogmatic, and as narrow as any of the creeds which he believes himself to be supplanted. Without a sense of awe in the presence of the unknown, religion would be a petty thing.

S. Radakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*

Abstract

Modern psychologists have approached the study of consciousness by adhering to a materialist-reductionist-mechanistic paradigm. Ironically, while psychologists were attempting to establish a science of psychology, developments in twentieth-century physics were undermining the very foundations of materialism itself and exposing the inherent limitations of reductionism. Despite modern thinkers' rejection of mysticism and their ignorance of the esoteric tradition, esoteric/mystical doctrines comprise "a science of consciousness and being." An examination, from an esoteric/mystical perspective, of the fundamental metaphysical tenets and world-view shared by both modern science and psychology, reveals the arbitrary fashion in which the materialist paradigm was established and continues to be pursued. Further, the prevailing assumption within modern psychology and science—that consciousness is generated by the brain's material processes—is revealed to be a house of cards. This is the first in a series of articles comparing and contrasting esoteric views of consciousness and reality with the dominant

materialist perspective in modern science and psychology.

"The Most Mysterious Thing in the World"

Although William James, who was one of modern psychology's founding fathers, spent many years speculating upon the nature of consciousness and theorizing about the subject, he readily acknowledged its elusive nature; conceding that consciousness was "the most mysterious thing in the world. Nevertheless, in his seminal work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James proffered the

About the Author

James Moffatt was raised in Ottawa, Ontario, where he attended Carleton University and earned degrees in both Sociology and Psychology. For the past 35 years, James has collaborated with Dr. Christopher Holmes in studying, writing, and lecturing about consciousness from an esoteric mystical perspective. James resides in Toronto, where he is employed as a law clerk, and also works as a freelance legal and medical writer.

following provocative musings on the topic:

Our normal waking consciousness . . . is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are all there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. *No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded.* How to regard them is the question—for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region though they fail to give a map. At any rate, *they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.*¹ [emphasis added]

Although James' opinion regarding the inherent mysteries and hidden depths of consciousness is one of the most famous and frequently quoted pronouncements in the history of modern psychology, its proper import within and impact upon the discipline has never been realized or even pursued seriously by mainstream academic psychologists. There can be no doubt as to the veracity of James' contention, that what we call "normal waking consciousness" is but one special type of consciousness, nor that the transformation to other states—from which we are parted by the "filmiest of screens"—may be achieved by numerous means. Most importantly, it is clear that these other states must be addressed in articulating a comprehensive knowledge of the Universe, and that, until we reckon with them, they "forbid our premature closing of accounts with reality." Nevertheless, during the past century, Western psychologists' considerations of consciousness have focused almost exclusively on the normal waking state in terms of their fundamentally flawed understanding of and limited approach to its study, while stubbornly refusing to acknowledge the reality and the importance of other states of consciousness and methods of knowing them. In doing so,

they have prematurely closed or, at least, truncated their accounts with reality and, consequently, have embraced an incomplete understanding of themselves and the Universe.

In fact, the slighting of William James' challenge—regarding the need to go beyond the normal waking state in addressing the nature of consciousness—is but one example of the strange tale of Western academic psychology's puzzling and frequently bizarre considerations of and approach to what might reasonably be assumed to be its most essential subject: the origins and nature of human consciousness. Even the most cursory examination of that history reveals the gulf separating psychology's ideals and realities, while documenting the essential inadequacy of the materialist-mechanistic-reductionist epistemology in providing a comprehensive account of reality.

Although many of modern psychology's pioneering figures—such as James, Wilhelm Wundt, and Sigmund Freud—considered the nature of consciousness to be an essential topic within their field of study, their influence was to wane with behaviorism's ascendancy as the discipline's dominant theoretical position during the second decade of the twentieth century. In an ill-conceived attempt to establish psychology as a legitimate scientific undertaking, the behaviorists defined experimental psychology by focusing on that which was externally observable and measurable—to the exclusion of all else. Mesmerized by the aura of the materialist paradigm's apparent potency, they dealt with the considerable problems posed by the existence of "internal" events and processes—that is those of the psyche—*by banishing all references to them and any acknowledgment of their reality!* And with that intentional act of intellectual self-mutilation, the fledgling science resolved, by decree, all questions of and problems posed by supposedly unobservable, "private" events and mental properties and principles—*especially* "consciousness." Like the drunk who, having lost his keys in the dark, searches for them on the porch—because there is more light there—behavioral psychologists would study only behavior because it was scientifically approachable, i.e., externally observable and quantifiable! Accordingly, all

attempts to understand the essential nature of the normal waking state were summarily dismissed from consideration. The existence of other states of consciousness and any attempt to understand the dynamics by which they might be realized or related to the normal waking state were deemed irrelevant.

The Science of the “Tangible” and “Approachable”

Although the term, “psychology,” is derived from the Greek and literally means the study of the “psyche”—that is, *the soul*—the behaviorists discarded that definition, along with any reference to or even consideration of the reality of the soul or any other human spiritual element or principle. Ironically, for all their scientific pretensions, the behaviorists’ formulation of psychology as the study of behavior was based, not on a rigorous and impartial evaluation of empirically established evidence, but *a priori* in accordance with its founder’s dubious logical-positivist assumptions and methodologically driven theoretical pronouncements. Thus, we find that John B. Watson boldly declared—in his 1913 definition of “Psychology as the behaviorist views it”—that the time had come “when psychology must discard all references to consciousness.”² And with that arbitrary declaration, Watson disposed of the troubling matter of consciousness. In fact, troubling matters were something that Watson seemed to have found quite untroubling, as he “scientifically” resolved such questions by simply denying their reality. Hence, he wrote that:

. . . “consciousness” is neither a definable nor a usable concept; . . . it is merely another word for the “soul” of more ancient times. . . . No one has ever touched a soul or seen one in a test tube. Consciousness is just as unprovable, as unapproachable as the old concept of the soul.³

Watson went on to say that behavioral psychologists could not and should not work with such “intangibles and unapproachables.” Furthermore, he rejected any form of self-study: arguing that, as a natural science, behavioral psychology “needs introspection as little as do the sciences of physics and chemistry.”⁴ Unde-

tered by the fact that he was defining psychology’s domain by amputation, Watson declared his ideological position as if it was based on empirically established facts. In reality, Watson’s theoretical position owed more to his subscription to a logical-positivist approach to science than it did to impartial observations or any attempt at systematic self-study. Nevertheless, his decision to divorce psychology from its essential concern with and roots in the study of the soul, as well as his denial of the reality of human beings’ inner life, established a school of thought which was to dominate academic psychology for the next sixty years. Furthermore, the behaviorists’ legacy continues to the present day in terms of its formulation of a materialist, mechanistic, and reductionist perspective as constituting the essential elements of the “scientific” and “objective” study of psychology.

The denial of not only consciousness but all internal processes and events brought psychology into line with the mechanistic worldview—which had emerged from the Enlightenment and had come to dominate science in the latter half of the nineteenth century—while aborting any hope of establishing a truly comprehensive and scientific study of psychology. It was a mistake of such monumental proportions and enduring pernicious influences that psychology has yet to recognize, let alone recover from its effects. In a wonderfully succinct and penetrating summary, Sir Cyril Burt captured the essential incongruity of Watson’s premises and his responsibility for the discipline’s sorry state when he wryly observed, in 1962, “that psychology, having first bargained away its soul and then gone out of its mind, seems now, as it faces its untimely end, to have lost all consciousness.”⁵

During the years that behaviorism dominated experimental psychology, Freudian thought continued to be the most prominent rival theoretical influence within the discipline. Of course, psychoanalysis was also the preeminent form of psychotherapy, in the Western world, during the first half of the twentieth century. Although Freud’s ground-breaking “discovery” of the unconscious had certainly overthrown many of the conventional assump-

tions about the nature of consciousness, he subscribed, nevertheless, to a materialist view: regarding consciousness as being the product of purely materialistic processes and biological energies. In keeping with the turn-of-the-century zeitgeist, he aspired to establish a psychology which conformed to science's mechanistic position. Thus, Freud denied the reality of the soul and spirit, and interpreted religious impulses as an attempt to escape from or deny reality. Essentially, he put forth a reductionist view of religious and spiritual phenomena: characterizing them as being nothing more than the product of primitive psychic functioning and an expression of pathological psychodynamics. In *The Future of An Illusion*, Freud provides an assessment of science's supposed conflict with religion, which anticipates contemporary materialists' view that, as science advances, God is being progressively squeezed into the rapidly diminishing gaps in scientific knowledge:

The scientific spirit engenders a particular attitude to the problems of this world; before the problems of religion, it halts for a while, then waivers, and finally here steps over the threshold. In this process, there is no stopping. *The more the fruits of knowledge are accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief.*⁶ [emphasis added]

As much as behaviorism and Freudian psychology were diametrically opposed on so many essential theoretical and methodological matters, they shared an antipathy to any definition of psychology which would recognize it as "the science of the soul." Their antipathy towards and dismissal of the legitimacy of religious, spiritual, and transcendental influences and aspirations—while couched in radically different language—fashioned and reinforced modern psychology's denial of spirit and soul. Naturally, they also shared a denial of the legitimacy of mystical doctrines and esoteric methods of self-transformation. Consequently, the unlikely alliance of the behaviorists and the Freudians has shaped the fundamental materialist elements of modern psychology's approach to the study of consciousness, with a concomitant denial of the existence of any in-

herent spiritual element or spark at the heart of human being.

Psychologists Regain Consciousness, Reportedly

After some forty years of behavioral research, many psychologists came to recognize the inherent imprudence in banishing consciousness from their discipline. While the behavioral approach led to significant discoveries regarding the laws of behavior, it became increasingly obvious that something significant "inside" human beings mediates stimulus-response dynamics. As a result, experimental psychologists began to admit the return of "consciousness" to the domain of legitimate subject of scientific study, albeit in significantly limited terms. During roughly the same period that academic psychologists were regaining a sense of consciousness, there emerged a significant body of academic theoretical work—generically identified as "transpersonal psychology"—which granted serious consideration to the study of altered and transcendent states of consciousness and, in doing so, drew upon the mystical and esoteric traditions, as well as parapsychological research and evidence. Transpersonal psychologists advanced the radical idea that the wisdom traditions of "the secret teachings of all ages" should be regarded as an important source of insight into and inspiration to the advancement of both psychology and the so-called "hard sciences." They regarded the fundamental esoteric tenet—that the level of one's knowledge is dependent upon the level of one's consciousness and being—as a critical insight which revealed academic psychology's self-imposed epistemological limitations and exposed the inherent limitations of reductionism. As such, the work of such theorists as Charles Tart, Robert Ornstein, Baba Ram Dass (former Harvard psychologist, Richard Alpert), Arthur Deikman, Kenneth Pelletier, and Stanislav Grof, signaled that academic psychology was beginning to stir from its self-induced slumber and recognize that any serious examination of consciousness—now that psychologists were admitting its existence—could hardly afford to ignore esoteric and mystical thought. In such

seminal works as Tart's *Altered States of Consciousness* and *States of Consciousness*, Ram Dass' *Be Here Now*, Ornstein's *The Psychology of Consciousness* and *The Nature of Human Consciousness*, Kenneth Pelletier's *Towards a Science of Consciousness*—as well as such related works as John Lilly's *Centre of the Cyclone*, Itzak Bentov's *Stalking the Wild Pendulum*, Stanislav Grof's *Realms of the Human Unconscious*, and Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*⁷—there were unmistakable indications that esotericism and western science had reached a crossroads from which each path would emerge intact, but nonetheless altered in ways which might not be understood for many years.

Unfortunately, mainstream academic psychology never granted the transpersonal theorists' work the consideration that it merited; consequently, transpersonal psychology has remained on the fringes of the discipline. Similarly, whereas Jungian psychology featured both a substantial theoretical perspective and a robust therapeutic approach—in which the importance of mystical influences and transcendent aspirations was recognized—its practitioners' influence on academic psychologists' considerations of consciousness was minimal. During the 1970s, it was the work of the cognitive psychologists—rather than the transpersonal psychologists—which became the most important influence in mainstream academic consciousness research. As a result of their efforts, consciousness research gained respectability and, accordingly, discussions of the topic were primarily focused upon cognition. Most psychologists tacitly subscribed to the equation of consciousness with the contents of awareness and, more specifically, with thinking. And, despite the fact that consciousness has become a significant topic within psychology over the course of the ensuing forty years, the results of psychologists' efforts have been, for the most part, disappointing. For, quite simply, psychologists' theories and pronouncements about the nature of consciousness remain strictly compromised by a set of dubious and/or untenable assumptions to which they routinely subscribe and on which they base their study of this most mysterious and essential subject.

Surveying the voluminous contemporary literature on consciousness—which includes the vast body of research carried out by neuroscientists over the course of the past thirty years—it is evident that, as much as there has been significant progress in the study of the brain, the question as to whether or not there has been corresponding progress in the study of the mind remains moot. Almost all mainstream considerations of consciousness have been and continue to be pursued by conforming to the strictures imposed by the discipline's continued desire to adhere to its own ideologically driven and constricted understanding of what science must entail. Because science had supposedly done away with all animistic, spiritual, religious, metaphysical, and conscious forces, properties, entities, and principles in the cosmos, there has been neither room nor reason to entertain the existence of a human soul or spirit. Moreover, in a Universe thought to be governed by Nature's purposeless, blind, mechanistic forces and influences on non-sentient matter, consciousness had been systematically excised from the external world and, eventually, reduced to and confined within the cortical mass of homo sapiens' cranial cage. And, finally, with the denial of the existence of any vitalist principles, human beings have been deemed to be *nothing but* fortunate aggregations of material molecules, and the mind has been reduced to *nothing more* than that which is the product of the brain's marvelous neural networks and their electrochemical processes. As such, psychologists have consistently *assumed* that the material processes responsible for the mind—mysterious though they may be—are accessible to external observation, measurement, and interpretation. The unquestioned assumption, among psychologists, has been and continues to be that these material processes are all there, *somewhere in the brain*, awaiting discovery by objective external observers.

The extent to which this assumption remains largely unchallenged and uncontroversial within modern psychology is highly peculiar—given the extent to which it has been so insightfully critiqued by not only the transpersonal psychologists, but also by such prominent neurologists as Wilder Penfield, Sir John

Eccles, Sir Charles Sherrington, and Karl Pribram. Nevertheless, “the head doctrine”—which is Christopher Holmes’ term for the theoretical position that the brain’s neurological processes generate consciousness⁸—is thoroughly entrenched with modern psychology and science.⁹ However, as Holmes points out, the evidence substantiating this supposedly self-evident truth is non-existent and, accordingly, it should be more accurately regarded as a belief or an article of faith, rather than an empirically derived theoretical postulate. Holmes contrasts that view with what he terms “the heart doctrine”: the enduring and repeated representation with the esoteric/mystical tradition of the idea that consciousness originates within the higher-dimensional space of the human heart and is “stepped down” to manifest as “a spiritual spark” which illuminates the psychic functions. In this view, humans are conceptualized as multi-dimensional beings existing in a multi-dimensional Universe. Holmes adds that “head doctrine” devotees have restricted their study of consciousness to the normal waking state and, by doing so, they have failed to grasp the reality of higher states and the subtle dimensions that they apprehend and reveal. As a result, he maintains that academic psychologists typically speak of only two states of consciousness: sleep and the waking state. Within that schema, they posit that the continuum of the waking state falls between the poles of drowsiness and hyper-alertness. All altered or transcendent states of consciousness—indeed, all of William James’ “potential forms of consciousness entirely different”—are banished from consideration, thereby prematurely foreclosing our accounts of reality.

Banishing the Spiritual

During the past century, the breathtaking advances in virtually all areas of science have demonstrated that its methods hold humanity’s quest for knowledge to a standard of what would appear to be unassailable and unparalleled objectivity. Accordingly, most scientists are confident and eager about pursuing the seemingly unlimited promise of future progress within their respective disciplines. Further, given the predictive and functional success of the materialist paradigm—that is, the

set of related theoretical assumptions, meta-theoretical and methodological conventions, and resultant aims and priorities—they tend to subscribe to it uncritically. There is, therefore, little concern and less debate within science or psychology about the materialist paradigm’s potential limitations or its possible inadequacies. In the same way, most scientists fail to regard science’s history critically, choosing to believe their professional “creation myth”: one which depicts the ascendancy of materialism, mechanism, and reductionism as the triumph of rationality, empiricism, and objectivity over the forces of ignorance, superstition, and dogma. The unfettered and impartial search for truth, the story goes, led science to liberate humankind from entrenched irrationality and unsubstantiated world views by submitting Nature to verdicts determined through tests of observable facts. In fact, the weight of historical evidence clearly establishes that the story of religion’s place in the rise of western science is much more complicated and nuanced than this conventional caricature would suggest. Moreover, it is necessary to recognize that, because the focus of this heroic tale is almost exclusively restricted to that which has been gained, scientists and psychologists seldom ask whether anything of value was lost.¹⁰ If, with the ascendancy of modern science, purpose, meaning, Spirit, and animism were ruthlessly expunged from Nature, and all religious, metaphysical, and supernatural qualities and faculties of humans’ being and connections with the cosmos were systematically excised, so be it! Reason and rationality ruled!

Missing from this account are the rather more complicated and revealing facts: that, contrary to popular belief, the rise of “material monism” within science owed as much to calculated and arbitrary philosophical, ideological, methodological, and political choices as it did to open-minded inquiry or objective assessment of evidence; and that fiat, caveat, and authoritative denial were the means of establishing a world view which grew progressively hostile to all that which would not yield readily to empiricism’s methods and the quanta of its measures. *Science did not disprove mystical, religious, and animistic views of the Universe; it banished them.* Moreover, many of its great

pioneers—such as Copernicus, Bruno, Kepler, Newton, and Swedenborg to name but a few—did not disown or discount their decidedly “unscientific” interests and beliefs in alchemy, magic, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, mysticism, religion, Spirit, soul, and God. In fact, many of their most significant contributions to the development of science were tied to those interests and beliefs—in ways and to degrees which modern scientists are reluctant to acknowledge.

Significantly, such inconvenient facts rarely appear in the histories and commentaries with which science extols its virtues to the public and socializes those who enter its ranks. And for the most part, this fiction is of little or no consequence. Routine science proceeds independently of whether or not its practitioners are well-schooled in their paradigm’s historical development. In fact, the same can be said regarding scientists’ awareness of their paradigm: for the vast majority of the work done, it is of little or no importance.

On the other hand, the paradigm and its history are of the utmost importance to its adherents in determining the questions they research, weighing the significance of anomalies and enigmas within its domain, and, most importantly, assessing the limits of its explanatory power. Further, these concerns are critical when scientists venture to comment or muse upon the nature of “man and God and law,” and all those other wonders and mysteries that exist outside the realm of established scientific fact. For, in doing so, they are given to serious lapses in identifying when they are speaking in terms of scientific evidence and when they are voicing rather more subjective opinions and beliefs. In the same way, they are often either unaware or careless in acknowledging that their views have been shaped by an approach which makes certain critical assumptions about both the world and how we may know it.

Galileo and “The Corruption of Nature”

Strictly speaking, a materialist theoretical perspective does not prescribe a reductionist methodology. However, as the course of modern science has developed, reductionism

has become an integral part of the materialist paradigm. As a result, science has come to regard reducing the level at which one studies any phenomenon to be the best means of gaining precision, and by extension, explaining it *in its most essential terms*. Therefore, the materialist-reductionist’s search for objective knowledge is predicated upon a set of assumptions which Ian Barbour has characterized succinctly to mean that:

. . . the behavior of any system can be exhaustively explained by the laws governing the behavior of its component parts. Briefly put, reductionism is taken to imply that religion is just psychology, psychology is basically biology; biology is the chemistry of large molecules, whose atoms obey the laws of physics, which will ultimately account for everything!¹¹

The reductionist approach has become such a fundamental feature of the materialist paradigm that most scientists subscribe to it tacitly and never question its limitations. The precision which a reductionist methodology supposedly insures has been embraced by psychologists in their considerations of consciousness and has led neuroscientists on their quest for the Holy Grail: “the neural correlates of consciousness.” While many psychologists proclaim their beliefs that neuroscientists’ astonishing discoveries and wonderful technological advances represent unprecedented progress in unraveling the mysteries of consciousness, there are many prestigious researchers and theorists who not only question such claims, but dismiss them as being nothing more than professions of the materialists’ enduring and seemingly unshakeable faith. In his recent book—*Out of Our Heads*—biologist Alva Noë, provides the following candid and provocative assessment of consciousness research to date:

After decades of concerted effort on the part of neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers, only one proposition about how the brain makes us conscious—how it gives rise to sensation, feeling, subjectivity—has emerged unchallenged: *we don’t have a clue.*¹² [emphasis added]

There are many scientists, psychologists, and philosophers—including those who subscribe to materialist views—who would endorse Noë’s bleak assessment of contemporary knowledge regarding consciousness. Given the elusive nature of consciousness and its seeming intractability, perhaps theorists should re-examine their fundamental assumptions about it and how it should be studied. R.D. Laing, the Scottish psychiatrist who became celebrated in the 1960s for his radical views on mental illness and its treatment, argued that the failure of consciousness research owed to the simple fact that *science has no way of dealing with consciousness* or, for that matter, anything which refers to *quality*—such as experience, values, and ethics. He contended that this situation has derived from “something that happened to European consciousness at the time of Galileo and Giordano Bruno.”¹³ Laing explained that the two men epitomized two paradigms: “Bruno, who was tortured and burned for saying that there were infinite worlds; and Galileo, who said that the scientific method was to study this world as if there were no consciousness and no living creatures in it.”¹⁴ Galileo declared that *only that which could be quantified should be admitted to the domain of science; whatever cannot be measured and quantified cannot be scientific*. But, as Laing explains, in post-Galilean science, this came to mean that *whatever cannot be quantified is not real*. He continues:

This has been the most profound corruption from the Greek view of nature as *physis*, which is alive, always in transformation, and not divorced from us. Galileo’s program offers us a dead world: Out go sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, and along with them have since gone esthetic and ethical sensibility, value, quality, soul, consciousness, spirit. *Experience as such is*

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cast out of the realm of scientific discourse. Hardly anything has changed our world more during the past four hundred years than Galileo’s audacious program. We had to destroy the world in theory before we could destroy it in practice.¹⁵ [emphasis added]

Laing’s comments cast Galileo—the fabled victim of religious persecution, borne of the Church’s dogmatism and intolerance of any challenge to its authority—in an unfamiliar light. Galileo’s definition of science as dealing with only that which may be measured and quantified set in motion a program which has profoundly influenced science’s materialist perspective

on not only human beings, but also their relationship—and potential relationship—to the Universe. Further, Laing identifies the “premature closing of accounts,” in coming to terms with the nature and origins of life and consciousness, that have followed from Galileo’s “audacious program, which resulted in the profound corruption of the Greek view of Nature as being “alive, always in transformation, and not divorced from us.”

In contemplating the questions of whether or not it is appropriate to regard life as having accidentally arisen from non-life, intelligence from non-intelligence, and consciousness from non-consciousness, biologist Elisabet Sah-touris questions the legitimacy of Galileo’s empiricism as the basis for his expulsion of life and consciousness from scientific study:

To answer these questions I was led to ponder what might have happened had Galileo looked down through a microscope into a drop of water teeming with gyrating life forms instead of up through a telescope into the heavens, already conceived in his time as celestial mechanics? Might biology, rather than physics, have become the leading science into whose models all others must fit themselves? *Might scientists then have*

*seen life not as a rare accidental occurrence in futile struggle to build up syntropic systems against the inevitably destructive tide of entropy, but as the fundamental nature of an exuberantly creative universe?*¹⁶ [emphasis added]

Sahtouris' analysis of the significance of the particular instrument by which Galileo extended his senses—thereby determining his outlook on the Universe and how it should be studied scientifically—is a further reminder of the arbitrary nature of his perspective. At the very least, her commentary reminds us of the wisdom contained in Werner Heisenberg caution to scientists that: “What we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.”¹⁷ Weighing the difficulties posed by the projection of mechanism onto what she regards as a demonstrably complex, multi-leveled, intelligent, self-organizing Universe, Sahtouris rejects the materialists' faith in magical transformations and accidental mutations as plausible explanations of life and consciousness. Instead, she suggests that: “It seems to me more reasonable to project our life onto the entire universe—yes, the heresy of anthropomorphism—than to project onto it *mechanomorphosim*”¹⁸ For the purpose of the present discussion regarding science's approach to the study of consciousness, Sahtouris' proposal reveals that not only is the reductionist approach a wholly arbitrary choice dictated by ideological and methodological imperatives, but it paints materialists into an explanatory corner: wherein life and consciousness *must* be explicable as having somehow *emerged* from matter. To a non-believer, it appears that materialists are wholly incapable of extracting themselves from what looks suspiciously like a dead end.

Despite the fact that, as Christopher Holmes and Alva Noë assert, no one has a clue as to how the human brain generates consciousness, the idea remains a fundamental assumption *cum* postulate of contemporary theories of consciousness. Indeed, this assumption is so ingrained in contemporary scientific thinking and is so intrinsically linked with the mechanistic worldview and the reductionist approach to research that most researchers never ques-

tion it. Holmes cites the example of how Nobel laureate Roger Sperry's comments on the origins of consciousness unwittingly attest to the extent to which contemporary theorists are 'head doctrine' devotees by default. Acknowledging the mystery posed by consciousness, Sperry states: “I don't see any way for consciousness to emerge or be generated apart from a functioning brain.”¹⁹ In response to Sperry's apparently reasonable befuddlement, Holmes observes that: “Of course, Sperry also cannot see how consciousness emerges from a functioning brain, but this seems to escape his attention.”²⁰ In other words, Sperry is appropriately humbled when contemplating the origins of consciousness independently of the human brain, but retreats into the comforting and, admittedly, apparently reasonable belief that the brain's activities produce consciousness.

Stanislav Grof, whose approach to the study of consciousness *is* premised on challenging the materialist-mechanistic position, states there is, of course, extensive evidence to suggest that consciousness originates in the brain. He cites the countless clinical and experimental observations indicating “close connections between consciousness and certain neurophysiological and pathological conditions such as infections, traumas, intoxications, tumors, or strokes.”²¹ However, while these observations “prove beyond a shadow of a doubt” that consciousness *is* linked to the brain's neurological processes, Grof cautions that:

. . . this does not necessarily mean that consciousness originates in or is produced by our brains. This conclusion made by Western science is a *metaphysical assumption rather than a scientific fact*, and it is certainly possible to come up with other interpretations of the same data. To draw an analogy: A good television repair person can look at the particular distortion of the picture or sound of a television set and tell us exactly what is wrong with it and which parts must be replaced to make the set work properly again. No one would see this as proof that the set itself was responsible for the programs we see when we turn it on. Yet, this is precisely the kind of argument

mechanistic science offers for “proof” that consciousness is produced by the brain.²² [emphasis added]

Grof states that: “the assumption that consciousness is a by-product of material processes occurring in the brain has become one of the most important metaphysical tenets of the Western worldview.”²³ Although scientists are disinclined to acknowledge it, Grof’s characterization is an insightful and important reminder that they are not only making a metaphysical assumption, but one of the greatest metaphysical assumptions in the history of science—equaled only by that which asserts that life is produced solely by material processes or that the Big Bang was the result of a random fluctuation of the quantum vacuum. (Addressing the issue of the allegedly *random origin* of the Universe, physicist Bernard Haisch states that the evidence supporting that materialist assumption *cum* belief is “precisely zero.”²⁴) Scientists like to believe that they long ago rid themselves of such unnecessary “intangibles and unapproachables” as metaphysics, but the simple fact is that the ontological chasm that separates the realms of matter and mind demands that they make that leap of metaphysical faith. Therefore, it is entirely reasonable to object that Roger Sperry’s contention—that consciousness is an “emergent property” of the brain’s activities—is really nothing more than an illusory word game by which he purports to account for that which remains unexplained. Similarly, the position which Daniel Dennett and his fellow “eliminative materialists” put forth—the denial of the reality of mind—is not, as they maintain, the basis for “explaining consciousness,” but rather “explaining it away.” Such attempts to reduce the mystery of consciousness to the realm of the “tangible and approachable,” reveal and highlight the essential problem which confronts those who subscribe to the materialist-mechanistic view of the Universe. It has been described succinctly by Grof:

At a certain point of its development—not clearly identified by mechanistic science—matter, previously inert and blind, suddenly became aware of itself. Although the mechanism involved in this miraculous event en-

tirely escapes even the crudest attempts at speculation, it is taken for granted, and represents a fundamental postulate of the materialistic and mechanistic world-view.²⁵

The Troubling Matter of Materialism

Despite its astonishing advances, it still seems something of a paradox that modern science—which has become an increasingly specialized and fractionated enterprise, focusing on smaller and smaller bits and parts of the physical world and the material human body—appears to be so confident that this reductionist path insures the acquisition of an increasingly comprehensive and accurate apprehension of all and everything. Furthermore, it is even more of a curiosity when one realizes that the limits and inadequacies of monistic materialism—the philosophical framework which provided the theoretical foundation upon which so much of modern science has been premised—have been clearly established by startling advances in twentieth-century physics. Ironically and extraordinarily, the quest to identify “the fundamental building blocks” constituting the physical Universe has revealed that, at the sub-atomic level, the physical realm is not so much made up of “things” as webs of relations and that matter is, in some essential sense, as spectral and elusive as the Holy Ghost. In the new quantum universe, Karl Popper—the eminent philosopher of science—said “matter has transcended itself.”²⁶

Surveying the curious history of materialism and its proponents’ claims as to its incontestable foundation in replicable observations, Theodore Roszak writes, in *The Voice of the Earth*, that it is easy to overlook the fact that, when the materialist program emerged in the seventeenth century, “*nothing* in it had been decisively proven at the time it was formulated.”²⁷ As he explains, no one had observed an atom of matter, nor had they seen “any complex natural object simply falling together by accident,”²⁸ nobody had ever built the type of machine that the Universe was said to be, and so on and so forth. . . . Quite simply, Roszak states, “the mechanistic worldview of the Enlightenment was a compilation of *a priori* as-

sumptions”²⁹ and became what was essentially “a secular catechism based upon articles of faith.”³⁰ Moreover, Roszak contends that the materialists’ commendable efforts to pursue knowledge in terms of pure reason “eventually ran up against a formidable obstacle: reality.”³¹ Thus, in the nineteenth century, it became apparent that the Newtonian mechanistic materialism “had no sensible connection whatever to biology” and, more importantly, “had no explanation to offer for the most advanced discoveries in the physical sciences: electricity and radiation.”³² When Michael Faraday introduced the nonphysical concept of “the field” to account for the mysteries of electricity, Newtonianism was, in Roszak’s words, stretched “to the breaking point.”³³ Indeed, as Roszak correctly maintains, “the concept of the field is as spectral as anything ever imagined by the theological imagination”³⁴ and, further, scientists’ application of such terms as “physical” or “mechanical” in describing a field are “really just a way to confer upon it a reality that [they] can continue to respect.”³⁵ Finally, with the bewildering and fantastic developments in the new physics that marked the beginning of the twentieth century—the work of Planck, Bohr, Heisenberg, and de Broglie—Roszak states that “the remaining ramparts of materialism” were torn down:

Matter ceased to be simple and ultimate. “Things” were replaced by “events” often of an ambiguous, if not highly contradictory kind. As the dividing lines between matter, energy, and pure space evaporated, it ceased to be possible to give a coherent picture of the property that supposedly made science “physical.” Matter had vanished into a mathematical formalism that measured, but could no longer render visible the elusive “something” that underlay the solid surface of everyday life. . . . What then does it mean to be a “materialist” in the absence of matter?³⁶

Commenting upon the challenges that quantum mechanics pose to the reductionism of classical physics, Ian Barbour identifies and elaborates upon further problems that confront the materialist-reductionist approach to the objective apprehension of reality:

What were once thought to be “elementary particles” seem to be temporary manifestations of shifting patterns of waves that combine at one point, dissolve again, and recombine elsewhere. A particle begins to look more like *a local outcropping of a continuous substratum of vibratory energy*.³⁷ [emphasis added]

This “substratum of vibratory energy” which underlies and informs physical manifestations at the sub-atomic level refers to the quantum vacuum: a concept which is, at once, profoundly mysterious and essential to understanding modern physics. Continuing, Barber identifies the need, in attempting to come to grips with the implications of what quantum mechanics has revealed about the nature of reality, to provide explanations which are holistic rather than reductionistic. Thus, he writes that:

. . . A bound electron in an atom has to be considered as a state of *the whole atom* rather than as a separate entity. As more complex systems are built up, new properties appear that were not foreshadowed in the parts alone. New wholes have distinctive principles of organization as systems, and therefore exhibit properties and activities not found in their components.³⁸

In keeping with Theodore Roszak’s line of inquiry, we might ask: what does it mean to be a reductionist when confronted by that which is clearly not meaningfully reducible?

Responding to the paradoxical fruits of physicists’ brilliant labors to penetrate the heart of matter, Sir Arthur Eddington famously declared that twentieth-century physics had revealed “a shadow world of symbols” beyond which there must be something . . . something which he believed physics could neither apprehend nor explain. As a result of the limits that physicists had encountered, Eddington stated that they had opened the door for mysticism in seeking explanations of the ultimate nature of reality.

Despite the critical problems to which Eddington, Roszak, and Barbour refer—and that many esteemed commentators have examined and commented upon in great detail—most of those scientists who trumpet the alleged objec-

tivity of the materialist position ignore its clearly established limitations. As such, they refuse to address the profoundly meaningful metaphysical implications posed by the existence of “a continuous substratum of vibratory energy” and its integral relation to the observable material realm. Similarly, by preaching the gospel of materialism as a comprehensive explanatory framework, they gloss over and finesse the fundamental mysteries as to how it is that, within the material realm, there emerge, with increasing levels of complexity, *new properties*—most importantly, *life* and *consciousness*. Nevertheless, materialists argue passionately that these miraculous transformations are *nothing but* or *nothing more* than material processes, and that they see *no need* to invoke mystical explanations for them. Indeed, committed materialists’ faith is so unshakeable that they respond to informed and insightful exposure of the glaring inadequacies of their explanatory framework by assuring their critics that, eventually, these shortcomings and limitations will most assuredly be overcome. Give us enough time, they assert, and we will produce “natural”—i.e. material—explanations of everything in Creation. Karl Popper has labeled such thinking “promissory materialism”; others might call it blind faith. Upon closer examination, it appears, then, that fundamentalist materialist scientific “explanations” involve a concerted intellectual denial of inconvenient truths and as such, their insistence that “all that matters is matter” is not really all that much more sophisticated than assigning the causes of that which lies beyond our explanatory power to the ineffable workings of “God’s will.”

Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament

During the first two decades of the twentieth century—at the time when John Watson was formulating and instituting the behavioral revolution in academic psychology—a number of influential Eastern teachers and masters were independently introducing various Eastern esoteric teachings to the West. The groundwork for this extraordinary influx of Eastern ideas had been laid by the pioneering work of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavat-

sky—who had established the Theosophical Society, in New York City in 1875, for the expressed purpose of studying and disseminating esoteric teachings—as well as by the efforts of Swami Vivekananda, who had introduced Vedanta and yoga to the West during his dramatic appearance at the World Parliament of Religions, hosted in Chicago in 1893. The appearance in the West of such revered teachers and masters as Paramahansa Yogananda, Hazarat Inayat Khan, G.I. Gurdjieff, and Krishnamurti initiated the spread of Eastern teachings on an unprecedented scale. As a result of their efforts, Westerners were exposed to sophisticated mystical and esoteric teachings, thereby fostering a climate of receptivity to Eastern influences, as well as setting in motion the cultivation and growth of esoteric and mystical ideas and practices that had heretofore been regarded as being the sole province of “the mysterious East.”

As noted, the acknowledgment and incorporation of esoteric and mystical teachings provided the foundation for the development of the transpersonal psychology movement during the 1960s and 1970s. The transpersonal theorists’ lack of impact on the mainstream of academic psychology was primarily attributable to their perceived association with “mysticism” and “the paranormal.” Simply put: *nothing* more readily evokes scientists’ and psychologists’ ire than references of any kind to “mysticism,” “the mystical,” and “mystics.” Consequently, most contemporary psychologists and scientists regard the idea—that they could or should turn to mysticism as a source of ideas, methods, or evidence—as being too preposterous to entertain seriously.

In their more charitable considerations of the topic, most contemporary scientists and psychologists tend to subscribe uncritically to the popular stereotype of mysticism as being concerned with those spontaneous visionary or ecstatic experiences by which certain individuals claim to somehow magically apprehend ineffable, eternal truths about themselves and/or the cosmos. Such experiences are generally labeled as “altered states of consciousness,” “religious visions,” and the like. Any understanding or knowledge attained by such

experiences is characterized as being quintessentially subjective—neither explicable in terms of ordinary language, nor intelligible to rational consciousness. Accordingly, they are regarded as being curiosities, oddities, anomalies—perhaps of interest for specialists in the study of psychopathology, pharmacology, ethnobiology, anthropology, or comparative religion—but *in no way, meaningfully related to fundamental issues and concerns of mainstream psychology or science.*

Significantly, no one attempts to understand these mysterious and anomalous experiences as involving “union with or absorption into God” or “spiritual apprehension of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect”³⁹—that is, in the sense of the literal meanings of the term “mysticism.” By failing to address these experiences, however, psychologists and scientists have ignored the extraordinary implications of what mystical states reveal about the nature of consciousness and human beings’ inherent capacities to realize its higher states. Furthermore, they have blinded themselves to the extraordinary understanding and insights that mystics have gained about not only the nature of the physical Universe, but the subtle realms which are integrally related to and inform the material realm.

More commonly, scientists are less sanguine in their considerations of and pronouncements on the subject of mysticism; evincing a marked antagonism to it as being the antithesis of their disciplined, impartial, rigorous, rational, and measurable search for and assessment of truth. Mysticism, in the thinking of most scientists, smacks of irrationality, ignorance, and superstition: the very forces of darkness from which science, with its lamp of reason, has freed humanity. Hence, “mysticism” and anything associated with it—such as its ne’er-do-well cousins, “the occult” and “the paranormal”—is anathema to almost all conventional contemporary scientists and thinkers.

Within modern science and psychology, then, references to “mysticism” are almost always meant to convey such pejorative meanings. Charles Tart—whose pioneering work on states of consciousness relies heavily upon mystical and esoteric sources—states that the

hostility which psychologists and scientists evince regarding mysticism and mystics is so deeply and rigidly held that they regard being “a good competent scientist” and “a mystic” as involving mutually exclusive allegiances. Indeed, Tart captures the extent of psychologists’ (and scientists’) rejection of all things mystical by stating that:

. . . being a mystic is considered pathological by most orthodox psychologists. One of the most deprecating remarks you could make about a scientist’s work is to say that it shows signs of being “mystical.”⁴⁰

Whereas Tart’s “good competent scientist” views mysticism as being weird and “pathological,” the true definition of the term suggests that mysticism is some form of ultimate science of consciousness and being: one which can lead to the direct apprehension of higher realities, spiritual truths, and God! In his book, *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament*, S. Abhayananda defines mysticism as “an intimate knowledge of the one source and substratum of all existence.”⁴¹ He describes those who claim to have apprehended this ultimate truth, through “a revelatory experience,” as constituting “an elite tradition.”⁴² In addition, he points out that the existence of this tradition should give those who deny the reality of mystical claims good reason to reconsider their judgment. For he explains that, in contrast to the diversity of opinion that the many philosophical positions and religious creeds have produced, the mystics of past and present evince an amazing unanimity. Thus, he writes that:

Their methods may vary, but their ultimate realizations are identical in content. They tell us of a supramental experience, obtained through contemplation, which directly reveals the Truth, the ultimate, the final, Truth of all existence. It is this experience which is the hallmark of the mystic; it goes by different names, but the experience is the same for all.⁴³

Abhayananda’s claim—that, throughout the ages, mystics have consistently reported experiencing these higher realities and truths—should give any open-minded student of the

human condition reason to pause. In focusing on the extraordinary quality of mystical experiences and their astonishing implications for understanding the nature of our potential cosmic connections, Abhayananda explains that, rather than being philosophical speculations, the great mystics' assertions:

. . . were based on experience—an experience so convincing, so real, that all those to whom it has occurred testify unanimously that it is the unmistakable realization of the ultimate Truth of existence. In this experience, called *samadhi* by the Hindus, *nirvana* by the Buddhists, *fana* by the Muslims, and “the mystic union” by the Christians, *the consciousness of the individual suddenly becomes the consciousness of the entire vast universe. All previous sense of duality is swallowed up in an awareness of indivisible unity. The man who previously regarded himself as an individualized soul. . . now realizes that he is, truly, the one Consciousness; that it is he, himself, who is manifesting as all souls and all bodies, while yet remaining completely unaffected by the unfolding drama of the multiform universe.*⁴⁴ [emphasis added]

If Abhayananda is correct in his characterization of mysticism, then there is nothing subjective about the true mystical experience. Instead, the state of mystic union represents the most *direct, objective, and comprehensive* apprehension of reality—insofar as its realization involves an unmediated mode of knowing which transcends the subject-object duality! By transcending the limits of the subjective, egoistic normal waking consciousness, the mystic dispels the illusory separateness which defines that state and realizes Truth by achieving union with the Universe and God. Given the fact that such experiences have been reported *for thousands of years, in virtually every culture, by adherents of diverse religions, mystery cults, philosophical schools, magical and shamanistic traditions* it would seem clear that anyone professing to make informed pronouncements about the nature of reality and the existence of spirit, soul, and God should study these experiences carefully and attempt to understand them. Sadly, the ingrained and

deeply irrational resistance among the intelligentsia in post-technological societies precludes such informed inquiry. Consequently, there exists an unfathomable gap between the conventional contemporary views, which denigrates mysticism as pseudo-scientific nonsense, and the ancient perspective, which embraces and reveres mysticism as a way of directly experiencing transcendent states of spiritual union and objective knowledge about oneself and the cosmos.

From Sense to Soul to Spirit

Scientists' dismissal of mysticism represents an epistemological break with what they regard as humanity's tarnished intellectual past: that which was dominated by magic, superstition, and unquestioning obeisance to religious authority and dogma. From a mystical perspective, modern science is riddled with a number of fundamental misconceptions—which form the core of its assumptive framework—regarding the essential nature of human beings and the Universe. The extent of these errors is such that most people—scientists, psychologists, and all types and stripes of modern thinkers—do not even suspect how acutely compromised and limited are their approaches to studying the nature of reality. The extent of this unawareness regarding the nature of the self and consciousness insures that modern thinkers and researchers will remain in the dark about these most essential and significant aspects of consciousness and being.

Mystics assert that our capacities for self-knowledge and our possibilities to experience expanded and heightened states of self-realization, spiritual truths, and cosmic consciousness are *dormant* faculties of our being. To realize the mysterious and profound depths of human consciousness and our astonishing capacity to know the external cosmos, mystic teachings emphasize the necessity of *awakening* these higher faculties to experience the hidden depths of the inner cosmos of consciousness. For until we do so, we cannot begin to apprehend our true nature, nor can we recognize the web of illusions in which our normal waking consciousness is entangled and, consequently, how its resultant construction

and limited interpretations of reality are determined. In contrast to science's denial of self-transformation, mysticism is premised on the conviction that realizing our dormant powers of spiritual realization and transcendence is not only possible, but constitutes the path which at once dispels our psychological illusions, fulfills our spiritual obligations, and leads to objective knowledge of ourselves and the Universe.

Clearly, such claims about the nature of self and reality, and the relationship between the two, are highly unusual and difficult to admit, even as a possibility. Nevertheless, it is most interesting and informative to realize that almost all

critics of mysticism—especially those who are most confident and vociferous in dismissing it as pretentious nonsense—seem to be completely unaware of the significance that many mystics attribute to the process of *intentionally transforming consciousness and being*. Yet, transcendent experiences of “higher realities” and “objective truths” are often the result of long, deliberate, and disciplined efforts to acquire self-knowledge. Therefore, any informed and comprehensive assessment of mysticism must not only acknowledge the existence of this purposeful approach, but also include a meaningful examination of the means and methods which are said to lead to the fulfillment of the mystic's quest. Alas, most critiques of mysticism are sorely lacking on both counts. As such, those who so readily and reflexively denigrate mysticism and deny its significance neither recognize nor address the existence of the “esoteric tradition” as a continuous current of special instruction, which provides highly sophisticated and demanding methods designed to aid and guide initiates in their quest to awaken and attain self-

... esoteric teachings provide elegantly insightful and detailed analyses of “normal psychology”: the nature, the properties, the dynamics, and the functions and dysfunctions of the psychological processes that define our normal waking consciousness and self. However, esoteric psychologies differ fundamentally from modern academic psychology insofar as they are premised on the aim of *transforming consciousness*...

realization. However, the fact remains that, throughout the ages, esoteric teachings and the “schools” in which they have been preserved and promulgated have purposely cultivated mystical illumination, revelation, and union through the development of higher states of consciousness and being.

Those scholars who have devoted themselves to the careful scrutiny and evaluation of the mystical tradition categorically reject the simplistic and ill-informed equation of mysticism with vague guessing, speculation, irrationality, and misty or insubstantial ideas and practices. Indeed, Evelyn Underhill described “mysticism”—in her classic work on the subject—as one of “the most

abused words in the English language.”⁴⁵ Underhill adduces an extensive body of evidence supporting her claim that the great mystics consistently describe their path as involving three stages or phases. In some cases, she says, they speak objectively of the three aspects of God or the three worlds of which they become progressively aware as they pursue enlightenment. In other instances, they speak of the subjective or psychological processes that distinguish the unfolding of the mystic's way: that is, meditating upon, contemplating, and realizing union with what Abhayananda termed “the one source and substratum of all existence.” Dionysius the Aeropagite, a fifth-century philosopher and theologian, describes this threefold way to God as involving “purification” (or “purgation”), “illumination,” and “union”—the three phases of increasing refinement of consciousness and being which attain their end with the realization that the mystic is at one with the Universe and God.

Whatever the terminology involved, Underhill asserts that the mystic's pursuit of his path

brings “new and deeper knowledge of reality as the self’s interest, urged by its loving desire of the Ultimate, is shifted from sense to soul, from soul to spirit.”⁴⁶ In this progressive realization of self-perfection and elevation of consciousness—from *sense to soul to spirit*—the mystic strips away the veils of illusion through which the self and the world are misapprehended and misinterpreted as being separate and diverse. Moreover, his purification or refinement of his psychological functioning leads to the awakening of the dormant higher faculties of consciousness. In doing so, the lower level of sense-based consciousness is superseded by the apprehension of higher realities and spiritual truths. However, this evolution of consciousness does not mean that the mystic somehow surrenders or forfeits her sense-based consciousness’ functions; they remain operative, but are “relativized” insofar as they are recognized to be the workings of a lower level and mode of apprehension. As such, there is nothing inherently incompatible between being a mystic and being a scientist or living what would appear outwardly to be an unremarkable life—one which is neither ‘weird,’ nor ‘pathological.’⁴⁷

The awakening of consciousness and resultant knowledge of the higher Self which fulfills the mystic’s quest was described by Plotinus as the state of union with “that One who is present everywhere and absent only from those who do not perceive Him.”⁴⁸ From a mystical perspective, modern scientists and psychologists, who have categorically rejected any type of self-study, are bound by the limitations and illusions imposed by the personality or sense-based, so-called “normal waking consciousness.” They deny *a priori* the existence of transcendent experiences and realms of existence. Consequently, they dismiss His existence on the basis that there is no evidence to support that hypothesis; a mistake which attests unequivocally to the fact that science’s “truths” are limited by its assumptions, its theories, its methods of inquiry, and most importantly, by its practitioners’ level of consciousness and being.

“Mysticism,” “Esotericism,” and “The Occult”

In a comment paralleling that of Underhill’s concerning mysticism, P.D. Ouspensky asserted that “esotericism” was *the* idea least understood by most people.⁴⁹ However, whereas the term “mysticism” is abused, “esotericism” is practically invisible. This is both ironic and fitting: ironic, because of the importance of esoteric influences in human history; fitting, because ‘esotericism’ refers to that which is “deeper within.” According to Ouspensky, there exists an outer and inner circle of humanity—the exoteric and esoteric, respectively—and there have been two distinct currents in humanity’s search for knowledge that correspond to and reflect the efforts of the two circles. While we are familiar with the outer circle’s history and its influences on the evolution of ideas, Ouspensky argues that we know very little of that which comprises the inner circle’s activities and accomplishments.

Esoteric teachings are said to originate from higher sources of consciousness and to be “created for the reception and transmission of these higher influences.”⁵⁰ However, in most cases, higher conscious influences cannot be transmitted to human beings directly. In the limited state of normal waking consciousness and being, we are typically unprepared and, therefore, incapable of receiving these higher truths. Consequently, a long period of preparation is necessary: whereby the pupil acquires the capacity to receive these higher influences, through the refinement of her consciousness and being, and develops the knowledge and understanding necessary to apprehend their meaning. Hence, esoteric teachings are created to attract those who seek to know themselves, and to provide the methods by which they can develop the higher faculties of consciousness necessary to do so. And in order to transmit these higher truths, those who know—that is, those who have realized higher states of consciousness and being—must teach “the seekers after truth.” Esoteric schools are the vehicles for that transmission and the establishment of the line of succession by which a particular teaching is at once preserved and passed on from a teacher to his or her pupils.

Mystical and esoteric teachings offer lucid and coherent expositions of psychological systems

and models of consciousness that lead to a radically different understanding of human beings, the Universe, and the nature of reality than that which is derived from modern science and psychology. Again, one might surmise that these doctrines would be confined to descriptions of higher states of consciousness and transcendent experiences: that which comprises “supernormal” or “paranormal psychology.” However, this is another example of how expectations derived from stereotypes fall far short of the truth. For esoteric teachings provide elegantly insightful and detailed analyses of “normal psychology”: the nature, the properties, the dynamics, and the functions and dysfunctions of the psychological processes that define our normal waking consciousness and self. However, esoteric psychologies differ fundamentally from modern academic psychology insofar as they are premised on the aim of *transforming consciousness*, and provide disciplines, methods, and techniques to do so. As such, esoteric psychologies address critical aspects of consciousness that modern psychologists have neither identified nor investigated and, therefore, do not understand.

Ouspensky maintains that all psychological systems and teachings can be divided into two classes. The first consists of those systems that “study man *as they find him, or such as they suppose him to be.*”⁵¹ Modern academic psychology, he says, falls into that category. The second class consists of all those systems that study a human being in terms of “what he may become, that is from the point of view of his possible evolution.”⁵² This second class includes numerous ancient and modern psychological doctrines and teachings that have been associated with various religions, mystery cults, philosophical schools, and symbolic teachings. Alchemy, astrology, and magic were all ancient teachings that were intended to cultivate their practitioners’ self-knowledge and further their aims of self-transformation, Ouspensky states. Similarly, such movements as occultism, Masonry, and Theosophy constitute more modern pursuits of awakening and self-realization. Despite the diversity of their approaches and their primary concerns, Ouspensky maintains that each of these teachings is a psychological system devoted to “the

study of the principles, laws, and facts of man’s possible evolution.”⁵³ On that basis, he contends that psychology, rather than originating in the laboratory of Wilhem Wundt in the 1870s, as is commonly supposed, is *the* oldest science.

Because psychologists have equated “scientific objectivity” with “external observation of others,” they have refused to study themselves and failed to recognize that the proper study of consciousness involves systematic self-study. At the same time, they have completely ignored and are unaware of the profound psychological systems that await those who approach esoteric teachings with a resolve to investigate them meaningfully. However, it is essential to recognize that, while it is possible to appreciate the intelligence and coherence of esoteric teachings by reading and thinking about them, acquiring insight into their depths and understanding their profound truths is dependent upon practicing their methods and applying their ideas systematically to the study of oneself and the world. Moreover, although esoteric psychologies are demanding intellectually, they also emphasize the importance of learning to understand how to quiet the mind through disciplined meditation and contemplation, as well as cultivating “unlearning” by overcoming one’s conditioning and acquired attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. The more that one studies oneself and the world in terms of an esoteric teaching, the deeper one’s understanding of one’s consciousness and being becomes which leads, in turn, to a radical recognition and realization of the nature of oneself and reality.

Given the richness and diversity of the mystical and esoteric traditions, it is useful to consider the following distinctions, between the two, which Richard Smoley and Jay Kinney make in their book, *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*:

Esotericism can be considered as a more or less systematic way of exploring the unseen, whereby the practices of meditation and contemplation are combined with a structured and sometimes rigorous theoretical approach. . . . By contrast, mysticism may be seen as more preoccupied with the

naked experience of the divine; theories and ideas may be seen as rudimentary or may be ignored altogether.⁵⁴

Smoley and Kinney further note that, while the term, “occult,” has taken on somewhat sinister connotations in recent years, this is largely the result of Hollywood’s distortions and fundamentalist Christians’ fears and projections. The occultist, they contend, is a magician “concerned with practical operations in the unseen realms.”⁵⁵ They continue:

The mystic . . . is principally concerned with reaching the Divine using the most direct path; everything else is mere distraction. The esotericist, on the other hand, while also seeking ultimate union with the Divine, wants to learn about the landscape that appears along the way. The occultist or magician wants to not only view the landscape but also interact with it as well.⁵⁶

Concluding Remarks

This article was intended to provide a broad overview of the inherent limitations of the study of consciousness within modern psychology and science, as viewed through the lenses of the ancient mystical and esoteric traditions. Given the enormity and complexity of the topics examined, detailed expositions of a variety of issues have been sacrificed for the purpose of providing a more comprehensive perspective: one which would focus on identifying and outlining critical issues and concerns pertaining to the study of consciousness. In addition, the aim of this presentation was to lay the foundation of a radically different explanatory framework from that of the materialist-mechanistic-reductionist paradigm, which dominates the efforts of contemporary psychologists and scientists in their attempts to come to terms with “the most mysterious thing in the world”: consciousness.

In subsequent parts of this series of articles, the depth of the mystical and esoteric teachings on consciousness will be elaborated in greater detail. To do so, it will be necessary to address significant meta-theoretical concerns: most importantly, the epistemological significance of what Ken Wilber terms the collapse of “the Great Chain (Nest) Of Being.” Wilber’s in-

sightful commentary on this historic transformation in human knowledge and knowing provides the context in which human beings have been reduced from being understood as multi-dimensional beings existing in a multi-dimensional Universe to *nothing but* and *nothing more* than biological entities occupying a Flatland Cosmos of inanimate and non-sentient matter. The reductionist methodology which dominates modern psychology and science is at once an extension of and dependent upon the collapse of the Great Chain.

The work of a number of other psychologists, scientists, and thinkers who have drawn on the esoteric/mystical tradition or articulated theoretical positions which are strikingly commensurate with its doctrines shall also be examined. Thus, the work of those who might have been conspicuous by their absence in this article—Ken Wilber, David Bohm, Karl Pribram, Rupert Sheldrake, and Ervin Laszlo, for example—will be discussed. In addition, the work of a variety of commentators—such as Christopher Holmes, Jacob Needleman, Aldous Huxley, Maurice Nicoll, Renee Weber, Margaret Wertheim, David Lorimer, Pim van Lommel, and Ravi Ravindra—will be presented for the purpose of adding much-needed detail to many of the issues which, admittedly, have been only superficially discussed within this introductory article.

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- ¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 298.
 - ² John B. Watson, “Psychology as the behaviorist views it” *Psychological Review*, 20, 1913, 163.
 - ³ John B. Watson, *Behaviorism* (University of Chicago Press, Revised Ed., 1930), 3.
 - ⁴ John B. Watson, *An Introduction to Comparative Psychology* (New York, Henry Holt, 1914), 27.
 - ⁵ Sir Cyril Burt in Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 6.
 - ⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1914), 48.
 - ⁶ Charles Tart, *Altered States Of Consciousness* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969) and *States Of Consciousness* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975); Baba Ram Dass *Be Here Now*,

(New York: Crown, 1971); Robert Ornstein, *The Psychology Of Consciousness and The Nature Of Human Consciousness* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973); John Lilly, *Center Of The Cyclone: An Autobiography of Inner Space* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973); Kenneth Pelletier, *Toward A Science Of Consciousness* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1978); Itzak Bentov, *Stalking The Wild Pendulum* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1997); and Fritjof Capra, *The Tao Of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Berkeley, CA: Shambhala, 1975).

- 7 The appearance of the transpersonal movement within academic psychology was presaged by and owed a great debt to the “humanist” movement, as pioneered by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. Rogers and Maslow shared the view that, within Western psychology, personality theorists had overemphasized pathological elements and slighted the importance of the need for growth and fulfillment, which they termed, respectively, “individuation” and “self-actualization.” Maslow’s focus on psychological health and well-being led him to his seminal work on human beings’ transcendent aspirations and that which he termed “peak experiences.”
- 8 Christopher Holmes, *The Heart Doctrine: Mystical Views of the Origin and Nature of Human Consciousness* (Kemptville, ON: Zero Point Publications, 2010). For an overview of Dr. Holmes’ model of consciousness—which he has derived from esoteric and mystical sources—see his 4 part series of articles, “The Origins and Nature of Consciousness,” which appeared in *The Esoteric Quarterly*: Volume 6, No. 3, Fall 2010; Volume 6, No. 4, Winter 2011; Volume 7, No. 1, Spring 2011; and Volume 7, No. 3, Fall 2011.
- 9 One of the reviewers of this article expressed concern about unqualified references to “psychologists and scientists.” While it is obvious that there are numerous psychologists and scientists who do not subscribe to the materialist paradigm uncritically, it is equally clear that a materialist theoretical and reductionist methodological framework—with all the attendant metaphysical assumptions—dominates modern psychology and science. Hence, all references to ‘psychologists and scientists’ herein, unless otherwise stipulated, identify those who are adherents of material monism.

- 10 The works of Ian Barbour and David Ray Griffin, among others, are highly informative in identifying and explicating the complexity of the social and political forces that have shaped the relation of science and religion since the Enlightenment. Ian Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical And Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997); David Ray Griffin, *Religion and Scientific Naturalism: Overcoming the Conflicts* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- 11 Ian Barbour, *Issues In Science And Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 6-7.
- 12 Alva Noë, *Out Of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2009), xii.
- 13 R.D. Laing in Fritjof Capra, *Uncommon Wisdom* (New York: Bantam New Age, 1989), 132.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 132.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 133. Galileo distinguished “primary qualities”—such as mass and motion—which he regarded as being “objective” (i.e., independent of the observer) from “secondary qualities”—such as color and temperature—which he viewed as being purely subjective, as they were sensory reactions to the external world.
- 16 Elisabet Sahtouris, “From A Mechanistic and Competitive to a Reenchanted and Co-Evolving Cosmos,” in Ervin Laszlo, *Science and the Reenchantment of the Cosmos: The Rise of the Integral Vision of Reality* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006), 103-04
- 17 Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 58.
- 18 Elisabet Sahtouris, 104.
- 19 Roger Sperry, “Emergence” (in the *Omni Interview*. New York: Omni Press Books, 1984).
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- 26 Sir Karl Popper in Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 106.
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- 28 Ibid., 104.
- 29 Ibid., 104.
- 30 Ibid., 104.
- 31 Ibid., 104.
- 32 Ibid., 105.
- 33 Ibid., 105.
- 34 Ibid., 105.
- 35 Ibid., 105.
- 36 Ibid., 105.
- 37 Ian Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, Or Partners* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 81.
- 38 Ibid., 81.
- 39 *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Fifth Edition* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 40 Charles Tart, "Some Assumptions of Orthodox, Western Psychology," in *Transpersonal Psychologies*, ed. Charles Tart (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), 111.
- 41 S. Abhayananda, *History of Mysticism: The Unchanging Testament* (Olympia, WA: Atma Books, 1996), 1.
- 42 Ibid., 1.
- 43 Ibid., 1.
- 44 Ibid., 2.
- 45 Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Meridian New American Library, 1974), xiv.
- 46 Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1960). This discussion of the threefold path is taken from Chapter 1, 8-24.
- 47 Contrary to popular belief, there is nothing inherently incompatible between being a mystic and carrying out most of the activities of "normal" living. Mystics rely upon and respond to the dictates of their sense-based consciousness. Thus, they eat when they are hungry, they do not put their hands on the stove burner when it is hot, and they know that you cannot trump an ace with a deuce. They differ from others by knowing and understanding that the material world which is perceptible to the senses is incomplete and, ultimately, superficial—insofar as it is informed by higher, more subtle realms.
- 48 Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, 9.
- 49 P.D. Ouspensky, *A New Model Of The Universe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 12-60.
- 50 Maurice Nicoll, *Psychological Commentaries on the Teachings of G.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky* (London: Stuart & Watkins, 1970), 163.
- 51 P.D. Ouspensky, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 6.
- 52 Ibid., 6.
- 53 Ibid., 6.
- 54 Richard Smoley & Jay Kinney, *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions* (New York: Penguin/Arkana, 1999), 46.
- 55 Ibid., 101.
- 56 Ibid., 101-102.