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“All Mind? No Matter”: The Self-Regulation Paradigm

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In this short article, the author discusses the conflict between materialistic and transcendental paradigms in accounting for the nature of reality. After speculating on the meaning and implications of an idealist perspective where consciousness is seen as the fundamental ground of all phenomena, the author reframes the consciousness versus matter debate in terms of complex systems theory. Such a reframing allows for the mutual coexistence of both matter and consciousness in a manner which is nonreductive and inclusive of different epistemologies.

What if “consciousness” rather than “matter” were held to be the ultimate reality, the ground of all being? What would be the implications for the planet, for society, and for people’s daily lives? Over the years these questions have been posed in one form or another, and have prompted other questions, such as what is meant by “consciousness” and “matter”? “Matter,” to use a common dictionary definition, is “that of which any material object is composed.” But what is meant by a “material object”? Do electromagnetic fields meet this criterion? Do “fractals” and “attractors” qualify as “matter”? And what about subatomic particles that have never been observed, but only hypothesized?

Definitions become even more contentious when the term “consciousness” is approached. Thomas Natsoulas (1992) lists six contrasting dictionary definitions of “consciousness,” each with different implications. Imant Baruss (1986–1987) identifies seven meanings of the term, and each of these is a cluster of dozens of other descriptions. Indeed, some writers equate “consciousness” with self-awareness, others with the activity of neurons and their interactions. Some claim that many nonhuman animals manifest “consciousness,” and others extend the phenomena to the computers of the future.

J.A. Hobson (1994) sees “mind” as something more fundamental than “consciousness” because most of the information in the brain is not “conscious” at any point in time (p. 205). Taking a radically different approach, one might argue that “spirit” is more fundamental than either “matter,” “mind,” or “conscious-

ness,” a position that is implied in Ken Wilber’s (1980) description of “involution,” the general movement from spirit to matter. George Feuerstein (1987) proposes that the idea of “consciousness,” like “love,” is “surrounded by a haze of ambivalence.” Even so, he concludes, “We all know what it stands for, even though our descriptions may not always match in every detail” (p. 35).

The Bishop’s Attempt

In 1710, the famous Irish bishop of the Church of England, George Berkeley, attempted to overcome the threat of “atheistic materialism” posed by the Enlightenment by writing *The Principles of Human Knowledge*. In it, he argued that all impressions of material objects, in other words all sensations, are in the final analysis no more than ideas in the mind. From this he concluded that the existence of an external material world is an unwarranted assumption (1952). As the cultural historian Richard Tarnas (1991) summarizes, “All that can be known with certainty is the mind and its ideas, including those ideas that seem to represent a material world” (p. 336). But deep reflection on this view soon leads one to wonder how it is that we all seem to experience the same world. Berkeley dealt with this challenge by claiming the reason that “different individuals continually perceive a similar world, and that a reliable order inheres in that world, is that the world and its order depend on a mind that transcends individual minds and is universal—namely God’s mind” (p. 336). Berkeley’s arguments for the mental basis of sensations, and more

radically for the absence of convincing evidence in favor of an objective material world, are forceful and cogent, but this final gambit, designed to save his philosophy from the pitfall of solipsism, lured few materialists back to the church.

In fact, though unfashionable today, “idealist” metaphysics offers an elegant solution to the so-called “mind-body problem,” especially if one passes on Berkeley’s heavy-handed theology. As a monistic approach it is more parsimonious than Descartes’ dualistic division of mind and matter, and unlike “materialistic” monism, it retains its advantage without degrading “consciousness.” Instead, “matter” is reduced to “mental contents” in one way or another. Peter Lloyd (1999), a recent defender of Berkeley, proposes that “the mental world is our primary reality,” and that “the physical world is a construct that we build out of our conscious experiences” (p. 1).

Berkeley engaged in a historical argument with his contemporary empiricists such as Locke and Hume. These debates were humorously condensed into such aphorisms of that day as, “All mind? No matter” and “All matter? It doesn’t mind.” However, echoes of Berkeley’s perspective are still to be found in the writings of such modern empiricists as Bas van Fraassen (2002), who argues that atoms, quarks, and similar entities are not to be taken literally as objects in the world. Instead, they are to be understood as convenient means for describing and predicting observable phenomena such as those resulting from physics experiments. And, to go a step further, if scientists can justify the existence of atoms because theories that postulate them provide the best explanation for scientific observations, why can’t religion similarly justify the existence of God? Despite Laplace’s dismissal of the God hypothesis as “unnecessary,” for many people it might provide the best explanation of the origin and design of the universe, as well as the ubiquitous prevalence of religious belief systems.

The Empirical Stance

Empirical science, however, is not about doctrines so much as about stances; it consists of attitudes, approaches, and methods. It involves the performing of experiments in order to test hypotheses. Thus, empiricism does not claim that atoms exist; neither does it claim that they do not exist. Nevertheless, atomic theory explained observable phenomena better than its competitors (Thagard, 2002, p. 971). Most

religions, however, do involve doctrines; they make claims about the nature of reality and take moral positions that have consequences for individual and group behavior. Adherents might justify particular religious beliefs (e.g., the significance of sacred scripture) and insist that these beliefs explain phenomena better than any rival stance. Among these stated beliefs, one often finds the claim that “divine consciousness” (Berkeley’s “God’s mind” and Lloyd’s “metamind”) is the fundamental ground of all creation.

What might be the outcomes of this assumption? When a religious group attains political power, the impact upon society is widespread. Not only did the Roman Catholic Church execute Bruno, reject Copernicus, and force Galileo to recant, but its Office of the Holy Inquisition (founded in 1542) labeled tens of thousands of people “heretics,” and burned many of them at the stake. In recent times, religious fundamentalists such as the Afghani Taliban have denied women basic education, prohibited them from working outside the home, and stoned to death those women convicted of infidelity. If “consciousness” is accepted as the “ultimate reality,” let us hope that fanatical religious authorities are not in charge of working out its implications!

Was Consciousness There First?

On the other hand, a more benign series of events might include the creation of academic courses addressing the “scientific study of consciousness,” and accelerating research programs in areas such as meditation, sleep and dreams, hypnosis, psychoneuroimmunology, and cognitive and affective neuroscience. Even parapsychology might find itself well funded. Already, some parapsychology buffs employ data from the fields of “extrasensory perception” and “psychokinesis” to buttress the argument that “consciousness” is primary. However, their position skips a logical step or two in that it can alternatively be claimed the “mind” that can “remote view” or manifest “clairvoyance” might be an emergent quality of “matter” itself. In the same vein, the “matter” influenced at a distance by “mind” (e.g., in experiments where random event generators seem to be influenced by “conscious intention”) could be no more than a “denser” form of the very same stuff that seems to tweak it. Compelling as many of the parapsychological investigations may be (see Radin, 1997), they do not constitute a *prima facie* case for those who insist that “con-

consciousness was there first.”

Now, during the first half of the 20th century the writings of Freud, Jung, and other psychoanalysts evoked “psychological thinking” among large numbers of people, most of them Westerners who were educated and well informed. Psychoanalytic perspectives found their way into literature, the cinema, and even a few Broadway plays and musicals, notable examples being *Paul’s Case*, *Spellbound*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Lady in the Dark*. More recently, cosmological ideas have replaced psychological theories as conversation items, and have become the objects of folk rituals and media portrayals such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *The Black Hole*, *Contact*, and even festivals in honor of comets. But could a paradigm shift focused on the basic “stuff” of the universe alter the daily lives of men and women in any significant way? And if this paradigm shift were to occur in the laboratories of science and the halls of academia would its repercussions soon affect society as a whole? It seems unlikely.

Venues that most rapidly catalyze social transformation often involve entertainment and the arts. “Consciousness” themes and schema might find their way into popular music, literature, television, and the like. Video games with a “consciousness” focus might flourish. Virtual reality technology could simulate synesthesia experiences, out-of-body experiences, and even near-death experiences. Talk shows would have a new topic for their “talking head” interviews, and panoplies of overnight “experts” would begin to pontificate and deliberate. Researchers and writers who have been ignored or sidelined for most of their careers would find themselves lionized; sales of their books would escalate from the hundreds to the thousands. “Consciousness” would become a catchword, and “studying consciousness” might become something of a fad. Berkeley would be hailed as a genius ahead of his times, and the good bishop could even become the hero of films, plays, psychohistories, and television mini-series.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to imagine what line of investigation would be able to establish the primacy of “consciousness.” Comparing “consciousness” and “matter” is reminiscent of the “apples and oranges” conundrum. “Consciousness” is not a “thing” or an “object” and does not lend itself to the sorts of comparisons one typically makes between objects. Perhaps it can be most felicitously described as a “process” (e.g., Guenther, 1989; Husserl, 1981). If so, Peter Lloyd and

other contemporary “idealists” might be well advised to examine current work in systems theory, chaos mathematics, and the sciences of complexity. Rather than rephrasing the “chicken and the egg” question, asking whether “consciousness” came before or after “matter,” explorers in these fields tend to see both “matter” and “consciousness” as evolving “processes.”

In complex living systems such as plants and animals, such processes have the capacity to self-organize, maintaining order in the face of internal and external threats and creating order in the midst of chaos (Woodhouse, 1996, p. 265). Even in the nonliving world, order often arises spontaneously out of disorder, otherwise how could biological life have originally emerged? On a larger scale of magnitude there is evidence of ongoing connections among all phenomena that coevolve within the Earth’s biosphere, and between these and the cosmos-at-large. Consciousness, both human and nonhuman, is a part of this network of interconnections (Laszlo, 2000, p. 114), constantly creating and re-creating itself as it unfolds in time (Combs, 1995, p. 135). This model, and the vision of the cosmos that it evokes, could well replace “either/or” approaches with “both/and” viewpoints that reflect a holistic, systems-oriented integration.

Connection and Communication

Because the theories of complexity are transdisciplinary, they can help make the intricate dynamics of human bio-psycho-socio-cultural change comprehensible. Without reducing the study of the psyche to physics, these approaches offer powerful conceptual tools to use for working toward a unified understanding of the cognitive and affective dimensions of human, social, and natural orders of the cosmos (Laszlo & Krippner, 1998, p. 30). Because a complex “system” can be seen as a pattern of interacting components, both “mind” and “matter” can interact in a nondualistic dance reminiscent of the Taoist yin/yang concept. There is always a bit of yang in every yin, and a bit of yin in every yang; neither is primary and both are necessary to each other and to the whole. New properties can emerge from a system, but they remain a part of an indivisible unity.

This insight motivated J.L. Randall (1975) to propose that systems thinking can more easily accommodate parapsychological phenomena than either a mechanistic or a dualistic approach. A complex systems approach has also been proposed as a useful

means to study the “transcendental potentials of the psyche ... at various levels of complexity,” as revealed in meditation, yoga, and various altered states (Krippner, Rutenber, Engelman, & Granger, 1985, p. 111-112). Using insights from chaos theory, Christine Hardy (1998) accommodates parapsychological phenomena in her concept of “consciousness fields,” replacing classical notions of “time” and “space” with such constructs as “semantic proximity, intensity, and coherency” (p. 194). These “networks of meaning” not only bridge “mind” and “matter,” they permit a novel way of understanding such complex systems as “consciousness fields.”

Since its mid-20th-century conception, systems theory has held that the whole is *more* than the sum of its parts. More recent decades have added the dimension of complexity, giving birth to complex systems theory and offering the realization that the whole is also *different* from the sum of its parts. In the meantime, chaos theorists speak of nonlinear and often indeterminate “bifurcations,” or transitions, between system states. Such bifurcations can reflect revolutionary transformations in the development of individuals and societies. Centers of power change, orderly standards are overthrown, and the chaos of transformation yields to new eras of comparative stability. These eras may demand the creation of new and more appropriate cognitive-affective maps, as well as revised personal and cultural myths—in other words, new ways of being. The field of “evolutionary systems design” is a rigorous, future-creating, self-regulating arena of inquiry and action (e.g., Banathy, 1996). Bifurcations have the potential of becoming emancipatory as new maps and myths emerge that offer a better fit to the new emerging realities of individuals and their societies. However, this outcome depends upon the degree of choice possible, and the determination of people to design their own futures. Freedom is one potential outcome but another is authoritarianism in all its forms (e.g., cultism, fascism).

Because it has yielded hypotheses that can be tested by empiricists, the self-regulation paradigm could be taken seriously by influential individuals and groups that are major “players” in science, technology, academia, the media, and even politics. The self-organization paradigm bypasses such shopworn labels as “mind” and “matter,” while honoring nonlinear worldviews such as those of indigenous peoples and of Eastern philosophy. It undercuts the superficial

semantic categorization of people according to their “race,” “ethnicity,” and “religion,” the buzzwords that account for most of the three dozen armed and bloody conflicts that were being fought at the beginning of the 21st century. In the hands of wise leaders, and with the help of “power players” of good will, this holistic paradigm may contain the potential to help the human species re-vision itself in a way that will assure its survival. Faced with the alternative, this possibility is more than worth considering.

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