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What Is Wholeness? The Consciousness View

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After decades spent ignoring the whole issue of consciousness, recent years have seen a boom, or at least a boomlet, of scientific interest. The vast majority of scientists still aren't interested in consciousness, and their indifference can be simply explained. When conducting an experiment in the laboratory, the air in the room is irrelevant (unless you are experimenting on air). Likewise, consciousness is just as irrelevant. Like air, it is necessary, but it is beside the point. Air and consciousness are just a given.

Ironically, this dismissal actually holds a clue to the mysteries posed by consciousness. Its very nature defies the standard methods of science, which are based on reductionism—a problem is reduced to its smallest logical part, from which an answer is produced from the bottom up. The method is familiar in medical research, which begins its investigations at the level of the gene and works its way up to cells, tissues, organs, systems, and finally the whole body. Wholeness represents the last stage, and thanks to medical specialization, the body as a whole is something the average physician in practice pays little attention to in comparison to his or her particular specialization.

Consciousness, on the other hand, has several peculiar features that stymie the scientific method, requiring it to be studied in a peculiar and unique way. First and foremost, the wholeness of consciousness isn't an end point for investigators to reach. Its essential nature *is* wholeness. There is no experience that is possible without it. Consciousness is in and around us, constantly present even if its presence isn't noticed, multidimensional (the levels of matter, energy, space, and time exhibit it without containing it), at once personal and impersonal. Human and extra-human.

Several parts of that description are either tentative or controversial, depending on how attached you are to pre-existing beliefs about the mind. For centuries there has been a non-dual (ie, holistic) view of consciousness. It constitutes one of two great monads that have been competing with each other up to the present moment. A monad is reality reduced to a single undivided source. The consciousness monad declares that all matter and energy in the universe have consciousness as their source; in fact, everything in the universe is a transformation of consciousness. The other monad is physicalist: it declares that everything in the universe has its source in primal matter and energy, pointing to the big bang as the event that proves the point.

In modern society the consciousness monad has faded from sight, largely because it was associated in the West with religion. The waning importance of organized religion coincided with the triumphant rise of modern science, which implies that the reality described by religion was defeated at the same time. But the consciousness monad survives in Eastern traditions from Vedic India, particularly Vedanta, Buddhism, and their offshoots.

Deciding the validity of the two monads is a zero-sum game. Either consciousness is the source of reality or subatomic particles and energy fields are the source. If one monad is right, the other is wrong. The tests that each must pass are opposites, however. The consciousness monad must show how mind (in the purest sense) created matter and energy, while the physicalist monad must show how subatomic particles and force fields learned to think.

On the face of it, the human brain seems to throw the argument toward the physicalist camp, because they point to fMRIs and other advanced brain scans as proof that the brain is thinking. The prevailing assumption in modern neuroscience declares that Brain = Mind. But such an assumption isn't open to actual scientific proof. A piano produces music, but no one would say that the piano creates music. If the brain is the

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instrument of thought rather than the creator of thought, we are left with the common-sense notion that it is the person's mind that generates thoughts, along with the three-dimensional image of the world we all experience. Physicalists squirm when it is pointed out that the auditory regions of the brain are silent; the visual cortex contains no photographic images and in fact no light.

The fallibility of "naïve realism," as it is known, has caused even staunch physicalists to admit that consciousness forms a special case that is unlike any other phenomenon in Nature. This admission has led to a fad for panpsychism, the notion that consciousness permeates everything in creation. Thus even subatomic particles possess some kind of proto-consciousness. But panpsychism is a rearguard effort to salvage the "thingness" of the physical universe by tacking on an invisible trait (which cannot be measured or quantified in any way) that doesn't interact with matter or energy, thereby leaving them to dominate their own sphere of activity.

At the same time, because the scientific worldview is so pervasive, hardly anyone notices what is in plain sight. The test for consciousness creating matter and energy is being passed all the time in everyday life. If you jump at the sound of a car backfiring, your body turns your alarmed reaction into the hormones that constitute the fight or flight response. They don't create themselves *ab novo*. Likewise, if you want to move your arm, the electrochemical signals running from brain to muscle are engendered by your intention. Arms don't move around just because they feel like it. At the level of the synaptic gap, the neurotransmitters that cross the gap in order to pass on neural signals seem to be pre-determined by basic laws of chemistry, just as the exchange of potassium and sodium ions through the outer membrane of the neuron's cell wall seem predetermined. But we have freedom of thought that overrides this level of determinism. If we didn't, the human mind would be incapable of original thought, including our unlimited capacity for discovery, curiosity, imagination, and invention.

The investigation of consciousness would proceed with radical speed once it is accepted that consciousness is whole (a monad), and that this monad defeats the assumptions lying behind the physical monad.

As a striking example of the shift in perspective that would occur, let me refer to the July 10, 2021 issue of the popular weekly *New Scientist*,[1] which devoted its cover article to consciousness, posing "The ten biggest questions about the greatest mystery in the universe."

1. What is consciousness?
2. Does consciousness create reality?
3. Is the universe conscious?
4. When did consciousness evolve?
5. What is consciousness for?
6. Can we see consciousness in the brain?
7. Can we know if a machine is conscious?
8. How many states of consciousness do humans have?
9. Can physics explain consciousness?
10. What is consciousness like in other animals?

If you skim these questions, several things become evident. First, it has been very convenient to ignore consciousness in mainstream science, because once you look at consciousness, too many questions emerge that baffle the physicalist worldview. Second, consciousness is like the mythical Hydra—answer one question and two more spring up. What if the questions are actually endless? That's a real possibility, and it is already creating a sinking feeling among physicists trying to explain the universe. Multi-dimensions have turned into infinite dimensions, and one universe has turned into a multiverse so vast (in theory) that for all practical purposes it is infinite.

But all of these issues are red herrings. These ten questions about consciousness can be broken down into one question, which isn't even on the list. Can we explain consciousness at all? A fish cannot know that water is wet, because its environment is all water. As long as we are awake, consciousness is the ocean we swim in (sleep, by the way, isn't the opposite of being conscious, since adept yogis can remain conscious during deep sleep).

As human beings we have no escape route out of consciousness. It is the definition of a monad. To step outside consciousness would be the same as stepping outside existence. All ten questions posed by *New Scientist* treat consciousness as a thing, like a quark. A thing is outside yourself. You can look at it from every angle. To mainstream science, it would be great if consciousness could be treated like a quark, but it can't. Consciousness is not outside you, and you are not outside consciousness.

This is what the ancient Egyptian symbol of the snake biting its tail was meant to show—consciousness is continuous and whole. If you relate to anything in the universe, you are using consciousness to look at itself. In that light, let's answer the ten questions. Every answer, it turns out, will be a variation on the answer to the first question 'what is consciousness?': Consciousness is the same as existence. Consciousness is the knowing element of every experience. It is that in which all experience occurs, all experience is known, and that which modifies itself as sensations, perceptions, images, feelings and thoughts that we interpret as mind, body, and world.

2. Does consciousness create reality?

Yes.

3. Is the universe conscious?

No, the universe is an experience in consciousness.

4. When did consciousness evolve?

It didn't evolve. Consciousness has no cause, so it is timeless.

5. What is consciousness for?

In humans it is for the unending journeys we undertake in consciousness—what else could it be for?

6. Can we see consciousness in the brain?

No, you can only see brain activity, which is an experience in consciousness. The brain itself is an experience in consciousness.

7. Can we know if a machine is conscious?

Yes. When a machine feels hungry, has sexual experiences, suffers from insomnia, and worries over existential dilemmas, then it will be conscious. Anything less is an imitation.

8. How many states of consciousness do humans have?

One. All other numbers are mental constructs.

9. Can physics explain consciousness?

No. Consciousness explains physics.

10. What is consciousness like in other animals?

It is their fundamental experience, as it is ours.

These answers follow easily once you accept that consciousness creates, governs, and controls reality. It isn't a thing like a drop of water. It isn't a quality, like the wetness of water. It creates new appearances without altering in any way, just as ice, steam, and water vapor are appearances that do not change the H_2O molecule.

Taking a holistic view of consciousness solves all the existing questions that science has posed, but there's a catch. Humans experience applied consciousness, not pure consciousness. We are absolute masters at creating words, ideas, models, societies, technology—the creative uses of consciousness are endless. But no matter what the mind conceives and creates, it cannot conceive or create consciousness itself. Such a task would be like asking fish to create the ocean. Fish can't create the thing that created them. A whirlpool can't create water. The same applies to the human brain. Being the creation of consciousness, it cannot create consciousness.

The snake biting its tail solves the problem of consciousness, but you have to look at it closely and let its meaning sink in. The snake biting its tail symbolism points to something that has no beginning or end, is immune to death, extends infinitely in all directions, and gives humans access to a field of infinite possibilities. As you let this sink in, don't be surprised if you are suddenly filled with awe and wonder.

When reflecting on wholeness as relevant to the whole person and whole health, consideration of consciousness is fundamental.

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