

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND: NOTIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE SELF

By Richard Flynn

"Most of us, for example, assume that we are some kind of solid self--a real, acting, deciding, powerful entity which goes on and on through an entire lifetime and perhaps beyond. Psychology is now revealing more and more of the constructed nature of self. The self we value so much is a mental model we have developed through a lifetime and which perhaps has no persistence beyond its similarity (but definitely not identity) from one day to the next."^(c)

The Psychological Self

Consciousness and *selfhood*, are some of the most difficult concepts to deal with in the ordinary sense. In its efforts to be recognized as "scientific", early psychology worked hard to be rational, predictive, experimentally repeatable and thereby falsifiable, in the best traditions of Popper's philosophy.⁴ (More recently, parapsychology has followed the same route). But as confidence has grown, so has the ability to ask just what we do mean by the "self", and "consciousness":

The emphasis, perhaps inevitably, has been on human consciousness, as the most accessible study. And interestingly, the acceptance of meditation work over the past thirty years (in the West) has been able to contribute to such study.^{3c} While many scientists would assume (pending further developments) that mind, consciousness and brain are synonymous, it is becoming clear that other intriguing and creative possibilities also exist. The idea of consciousness as a mental model of self, and the world, is a new paradigm being explored.

The more sophisticated the ability to form mental models of the self and one's

environment, it seems, the more complex and rich the *self* becomes. Blackmore^{3a} cites experiments which indicate that the conscious self *rides*, as it were, upon a much larger field of awareness, drawing into its field of direct knowing only those events or possibilities which can be fitted into its currently accepted models of reality. *Multiple personalities* then are "an extreme form of the normal case"; models that jostle for dominance rather than integrate into or share a reasonably stable overall field of self-awareness.

We can use this approach to develop ideas on consciousness not just for human beings, but other species as well. Insects and animals have some type of awareness, obviously; but seem to lack that flexible self-awareness which characterizes humanness, and which gives us a sense of time--the ability to compare past with present, and plan for the future. As Susan Blackmore comments, "...the models in the lower levels of perceptual processing entail no concept of a self, action or an external world. This consciousness would be correspondingly limited. Only the complex model of *self in the world* sustains full reflexive awareness--consciousness of being conscious. It is this which seems to be "me".^{3a}

A Multitude of Lives

One of the most harmful illusions that can beguile us is probably the belief that we are an indivisible, immutable, totally consistent being", says Ferruci at the start of Chapter 4 of *What We May Be*. Psychosynthesis has from the start held the idea of a "constellation" of subpersonalities that form "psychological satellites, coexisting as a multitude of lives within the overall medium of our personality".

When we learn to recognize them, often starting by giving them humorous names, it enables us to *dis-identify* with them, "snapping out of this illusion and returning to oneself". Such recognition may be accompanied by insight, a sense of liberation, or perhaps, dismay or anxiety. In psychosynthesis, learning to integrate the various subpersonalities into a connected whole which one can call on as and when needed, is a healthy and active part of the work.

"All subpersonalities are expressions of vital elements of our being, however negative they may seem to us at first". As Will Parfitt comments, "we become like the conductor, allowing each individual member to play a part, and working towards orchestrating the personality into a harmonious whole. This conductor is the self or "I". And he goes on to add, "As the conductor, we will also contact the composer, the transpersonal Self, who will supply us with information about how to play the musical composition of life..."⁷

So in this particular approach, active acceptance of the *multiple self* exists, alongside an extension of the idea to a *transpersonal Self*. The self, or Self, are simply defined as "centers" or "cores" of pure awareness, which in some way provide consistency, and reliability. To know them as such, they have to be experienced, rather than talked about: correctly so, perhaps, but unhelpful in a discussion.

Quantum, Cellular and Cosmic Parallels

Science, then, tends to either avoid the subject, or become entangled in its mystery as does the average person. Yet, remarkably, quantum theory, a mainstay of modern physics, seems to demand its presence for reality to take shape.⁴ Exactly how mind 'makes' matter is obscure; an "act of measurement" is needed by an *observer*, and that is as far as most physicists will go.

The Quantum Atom.

Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall have made much of this in their book "The Quantum Self".

They compare the well-known wave-particle duality behavior of subatomic particles with the way in which the self must both be individual and part of groups, for example. We can also consider this duality to be characteristic particle behavior. Perhaps this is an indication of a limited choice of identity when given a specific laboratory environment in which to manifest?

The Cell.

Developing a modern description of a cell, "The New Biology" quotes Paul Weiss, "There is a major flaw, however, in the analogy between a cell and a man-made factory. While in the latter, both building and machinery are permanent fixtures, established once and for all, many of the corresponding subunits in the system of the cell are of ephemeral existence--in the sense that they are continuously or periodically disassembled and rebuilt, yet always each according to their kind and standard pattern. In contrast to a machine, the cell interior is heaving and churning all the time; the positions of granules or other details in the picture, therefore, denote just momentary way-stations, and the different shapes of sacs or tubules signify only the degree of their filling at the moment. The only thing that remains predictable amidst the erratic stirring of the molecular population of the cytoplasm and its substructures is the overall pattern of dynamics that keeps the component activities in definable bounds of orderly restraints. These bounds again are not to be viewed as mechanically fixed structures, but as *boundary conditions* set by the dynamics of the system as a whole."

The Universe.

And in terms of that encompassing whole, the universe, we have at present two interesting scenarios. In Everett's "parallel universe" interpretation of quantum mechanics, we see a universe that contains within itself a vast variety of alternatives, depending on the choices made by those living within it who are able to choose alternative actions. While such a complex field of *multiple selves* upsets many physicists, it has not been disproved. Alternatively, we can look at our

universe in more orthodox terms, an *all-there-is* comprised of an evolving complexity of space-time, and observe that its internal nature (in the form of galaxies, solar systems, etc.) is itself evolving over eons, while still being a *universe*: subpersonalities of a self on a cosmic scale.

Esoteric Ideas on the Self

In orthodox esoteric theory there is a comforting simplicity at first reading. The (human) personality is a threefold expression of the soul, which in turn is a threefold expression of spirit, or monad. Only orthodox Buddhism sounds a warning note: that there is essentially no *self*, just as there is no simple God. There is, instead, merely a coruscating pattern of thoughts, emotion and action which when used together seem to make up a self. Nevertheless, reincarnation is still inevitable, until full enlightenment is reached! The paradox of no self as such, but some sort of consistent reincarnation, is not easily resolved.

Most esoteric psychology today is dealt with in either astrological terms, or by calling on the "seven ray" system of Alice Bailey. Bailey provides a listing of the psychological effects of these "rays", plus an example of a human individual with a certain ray profile, to show how it might work out.² Given a certain emphasis ("polarization") of one state of consciousness over another, yet taking the others into account, a pattern of the current state of affairs, with indications for future development, can be derived. In this approach we see the consistency of selfhood being recognized, with the potential for change and growth implied.

By contrast, when we look at more modern material, we see emphasized more the flexibility and open-endedness of consciousness and the human self. We read, for example: "Ego rises out of what you are, in other words. It is a part of the action of your being and consciousness, but as the eye cannot see its own shifting colors and expressions, as it is not aware that it lives and dies constantly as its atomic structure changes, so you are not aware that the ego continually changes, dies and is

reborn".

"So psychological structures form to which various names are given. The names are meaningless, but the structures behind them are not. Such psychological structures also retain their identity, their pattern of uniqueness, even while they change constantly, die and are reborn." Souls are also creative psychic structures, ever-changing and yet always retaining individual integrity, and all are dependent one upon the other. Souls make up the life of the entity, in those terms."⁸

In both of these approaches, old and new, there is also the idea *possession* or *obsession*, the way in which ideas and emotions can magnetically attract others of like ilk, even ultimately self-aware entire structures which then take over the original ego and effectively *push it out* of control. This, while far less common than popular fascination with the idea would indicate, does show again how open-ended yet specific the self can be.²

Consistency and Change

All of this, obviously, is designed to encourage readers to explore responsibly their sense of self, and to get a feel for not just the range of their consciousness, but also what Jane Roberts calls the "contours of the psyche"--the overall nature of your own inner landscape. Yet the Buddhist paradox remains--with all this flexibility, including a possible feedback with alternate selves, why do so many of us go on feeling obstinately like "ourselves"?

The modern esoteric approach would say it comes from what it calls "belief structures", in particular their relative strengths, and thereby their persistence, or consistency. Even if the self is recreated moment by moment, even if *alternative selves* are brought into experiential focus, the more strongly certain beliefs are held, the more rigidly they will censor other available possibilities, and so lead to consistent behavior patterns. Where beliefs or principles are more easily held, or seen as less crucial, alternate options can present themselves, even apparent paradoxes, and be accepted as part of the larger *dimensions of the conscious self*.^{3c; 8}

A Spectrum of Perspectives

Both Bailey and Roberts, then, present essentially the same case, but from different perspectives. Both suggest selves, or states of consciousness able to grow and expand, ultimately right away from their original state. Both also see a consistency, or integrity, maintained by a "belief structure" on the one hand, or an awareness "polarized in a given vehicle" of specific ray or astrological qualities, on the other.

Most of the current esoteric focus follows these two lines of thought, which are essentially one line of thought, and as we can see, they tie in fairly well with current models of personality-based selfhood both in psychosynthesis and cognitive psychology. While the nature of consciousness remains elusive in all these approaches, scientific or esoteric, the qualities associated with it are very similar; a dynamic ability to be reasonably consistent yet alterable, under appropriate conditions. And in all these approaches, too, it seems that it is our choice of how far or how fast to go, in our search for growth and the meaning of the self.

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