

Consciousness

The Final Frontier



It's the basis of all our experience – the mystical and ordinary kinds... all the more reason why consciousness is the most important phenomenon left for human beings to study, argues Dr. Peter Nelson

Consciousness, not outer space, is the final frontier. In fact, moving off the planet to find new territories and riches is just another example of a misplaced human hungering and rapaciousness which we have inherited as part of our evolutionary past. I would argue that consciousness—as the source of

everything we experience and know—is the ultimate frontier in our search for our human nature, origins and place in the universe.

The urge to achieve, acquire and know more is both our greatest gift as conscious beings as well as our greatest curse as biological entities. We feel, think, act, react and know in an endless cycle of doing which is only ever marginally reflected upon as we navigate the waters of our lives. We tend to experience ourselves as swimming in an ocean of reality which we intrinsically feel is ‘out there’ all around us, thus experiencing ourselves as embedded ‘in’ a world whose currents carry us along while reflecting back to us a self-identity as ‘thing-in-the-world’. We experience and, therefore, we and everything else exist. From this perspective we

are in the position to understand consciousness as the gateway to our fundamental nature as well as to reality itself.

What is this consciousness of which I write? Is it a ‘thing’ through which the buzz, ebb and flow of moment to moment daily experiences flows? Is it an illusion to be explained as a collection of brain mechanisms? Is it intrinsically connected to the quantum physical world or is it something a computer might do one day?

These and many other such questions are being asked by a diverse group of researchers and thinkers from around the world who find themselves gathering every

two years at the University of Arizona Medical School in Tucson to argue and debate the nature and origins of consciousness. They include such luminaries as Francis Crick (co-discoverer of the DNA double-helix), Nobel Laureate physicist Brian Josephson, information theorist David Chalmers, philosopher John Searle, neuroscientist Roger Penrose, psychiatrist Arthur Deikman, parapsychologist Daryl Bem and more. There are many points of divergence in their views, but one belief is held in common—consciousness is the least understood but most important phenomenon left for human beings to study and understand.

“The basis of authentic compassion is deeper consciousness.”

From my perspective as a social scientist, the exploration and opening of consciousness is also the final frontier in any attempt to solve the growing problems of war, social injustice and dissolution. The Mahayana School of Buddhism long ago recognised this truth when it formulated the ideal of the Bodhisattva—the enlightened being. For the members of this ancient religio-philosophical tradition there is no enlightenment without a profound awareness of our fellow sentient beings. For the Bodhisattva, as well as for any truly conscious person, the development of consciousness leads to a connectedness so profound, that it becomes difficult to harm others without experiencing it as harm to oneself. Thus, the basis of authentic com-

passion is deeper consciousness.

These days, however, it seems as though we have lost much of our capacity for connectedness – a problem coming into sharp focus for those working in the helping professions. In fact, a growing belief among social workers, psychotherapists and counsellors is that at the heart of family breakdown and child abuse there is most often a failure of empathy—a loss of the ability to be consciously and directly connected to the hearts and minds of others. It's here that I would like to draw a distinction between empathy and sympathy. The latter is the act of feeling 'for' someone as an outsider looking in, whereas empathy is a dispassionate connectedness in which the existential 'space' is directly shared with the other as an 'insider' and 'outsider' simultaneously.

Increasingly, we are asked to be sympathetic regarding the underlying causes of socially destructive behaviours and attitudes in others. We hear about the deprivations suffered by anti-social individuals and are asked not to judge, but to accept—to be sympathetic—and we are surprised over and again when these individuals continue to violate us in spite of our understanding. I believe that the development of a dispassionate empathic awareness would allow us to better 'see' into the hearts and minds of those we encounter

and to act accordingly with greater clarity, alacrity and compassion in order to protect them, ourselves and the social whole.

There are, I believe, instances where a blanket application of well intended principle and superficial sympathy fails desperately at empathic consciousness. In fact, there is a deep *unconsciousness* in this blanket kind of response—a failure to enter the life-space of the individual and to understand him/her from the perspective of both 'insider' and 'outsider'. It is only from a combined perspective that we can know

the true intent of another and act appropriately. Without understanding the processes of consciousness and therefore being able to engage a deeper discriminating awareness, we are left to act according to what we idealise rather than what actually confronts us.

I would argue that creative, prosperous and safe communities are not possible without understanding the processes and ways of consciousness that can be pragmatically applied to daily life. Traditionally, religions such as Buddhism provide teaching on how to understand and apply conscious awareness with penetrating and discriminating clarity. However, religions often bring with them the kind of cultural and religious baggage, that, I believe, ultimately only confuses and limits our participation in this process. What we need is to bring the study of consciousness and the practice of cultivating greater conscious aware-

ness into the mainstream – not just out of theoretical curiosity, but to deepen our capacities as human beings.

Where are we – here in New Zealand and Australia – in relation to the worldwide boom in the study of consciousness? The answer is nowhere, unfortunately. While there are pockets of interest (an online Australian based consciousness studies journal called Psyche springs to mind), there are no actual departments of Consciousness Studies in either New Zealand or Australian tertiary institutions.

So, how about a school of Consciousness Studies here in Aotearoa New Zealand? It could be a stand-alone organisation, like similar schools in the U.S., such as CIIS (California Institute of Integral Studies). Or it might be taken under the wing of an existing tertiary institution, as an interdisciplinary department. Either way, its focus would be both theoretical and practical, resulting in the production of a new breed of philosophers, scientific methodologists and helping professionals, all informed by the issues of consciousness.

Are you interested? If so, then write to us expressing your vision and how you might contribute and what you would like to see as part of such a school. Address your letters to Dr. Peter Nelson, PO Box 4114, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Peter Nelson is an academic and a senior research consultant. He has studied consciousness and mystical experiences for more than 20 years and has taught psychology at universities in Australia and the U.S.