

A 5,000 word article in three parts

Don Cupitt's 'Unlearning Self' Considered

(Part One)

Douglas Lockhart

The chief Spanish contribution to the Counter-Reformation was mystical. The mystics of Iberia became explorers of the spiritual world, in rather the same way as the great navigators were discovering new regions of the physical world. Mysticism belonged to the realm of mythos; it functioned in the domain of the unconscious which was inaccessible to the rational faculty and has to be experienced by other techniques. Nevertheless, the mystical reformers of Spain wanted to make this form of spirituality less haphazard, and eccentric, less dependent upon the whims of inadequate advisers.

Karen Armstrong
The Battle for God, p 5.

The Uninterrupted Humming of Life's Depths

Dr. Johnson remarked that mystics who have experienced the unutterable should not attempt to utter it, a sentiment secular humanists would accept without question. Yet mystics do try to utter the unutterable, and some of their utterances have deeply influenced human thought for centuries.

A way into this problem is found in the thinking of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who viewed consciousness as a continuity, an organic whole composed of mutually permeating states, and as a flow of lived experience that reason isolates and immobilises at intervals. Reason is said to transform the character of what is experientially fluid into impersonal elements as distinctly separate as material objects. It is as if gaps appear in the self's comprehension of self, other and world, gaps that hold us in isolation, gaps across which we can but stare if we rely a little too much on reason's

impersonal glimpses of reality. To escape from this potentially debilitating state requires an act of mental daring, an intentional dipping back into the flux of consciousness so that its nature can properly register on us. We are not the mentally tidy creatures we believe ourselves to be: we are an indivisible fusion of “manyness” and “oneness”, a flowing that is ever new and always unpredictable. But not so easily done this dipping back into. We have, as Bergson puts it, “no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths.” Language bedevils us by imposing the same kind of gaps between our experiences as exist between material objects.

Speaking of this flux in *Mysticism After Modernity*, the philosopher and religious reformer Don Cupitt describes his own experience of meditation as a “dissolving away [of] false dualisms and ideas of substance that were troubling us.” The self is “melted down into a silent outpouring of pure insubstantial secondariness [and] we find ourselves unlearning our way down to the most perfect happiness in the pure Emptiness.” He then talks of the modern conception of mysticism, and after a line or two suggests that classical mystics were “repackaged as psychic sensitives [who] confirmed the truth of orthodoxy.” One minute we’re descending into the flux of consciousness and undergoing an “unlearning” experience, the next we’re being presented with an argument where mystical experience is said to have been hijacked by orthodoxy and used to confirm the authenticity of doctrinal ideas. Then, just as quickly, mystics are turned into “hard-core” literary writers influenced by Neoplatonism and negative theology. It’s all an intellectual mess, we’re told. At their worst mystics are either in the pocket of orthodoxy, or simply used by orthodoxy to support doctrinal claims. Or, as in the case of intellectual mystics like Meister Eckhart (Cupitt likes Eckhart), their offerings are disguised forms of deconstructive criticism designed to undermine official Church teaching.

This harks back to a previous statement where Cupitt spells out his view that classical mystic utterances were in fact subversive statements written in “code” to fool the religious authorities. Real mystics were closet reformers whose obtuse writings were a disguised challenge to the religious status quo. No mention of a descent into “unlearning” in relation to these mystics, just the bold assertion that they were out to undermine religious orthodoxy.

Dr. Johnson’s suggestion that mystics refrain from the attempt to utter the unutterable is closely paralleled by Cupitt when he says: “definitions in the language of mysticism are self-refuting. [They are] attempts to say what cannot be said, to eff what is logically ineffable.” So there are in effect two types of mystical experience on offer, not one, and the one through which mystics attempt to communicate what they have experienced in the depths of consciousness has to be rejected as beyond the capacity of language to deliver. Problem is, which mystic utterances is Cupitt referring to? He seems pretty sure that statements made by most mystics are coded criticisms of the religious

establishment, but equally sure that others are unintelligible gibberish. So by what means does he arrive at such a clear-cut differentiation? Cupitt's answer is two fold: mystics were generally (but not always) from the lower strata of ecclesiastical rank, and from equally humble levels of the religious and of the laity, and he can detect these subversives by how they develop their arguments. So on the one hand lower-strata social discontent is the culprit, and on the other a form of mystical craziness that attempts the impossible - the communication in language of experiences beyond the capacity of language to express.

This explanation seems pretty straight forward, but it isn't, not really; it's actually a fudging of what is in these mystical texts due to an overly logical rejection of explanations to the contrary. Yes, mystical texts are often subversive of Church doctrine, but not wholly for the reasons given by Cupitt; he has perhaps been distracted by the fact that some early Gnostic texts are now identified as carefully coded insults directed at the religious establishment. But even there such subversion lies snug amidst what is obviously "descent" language, and as Cupitt knows from experience, and articulates in a philosophically obtuse manner, descent into the psyche is a process of progressive unlearning. False dualism melt away.

Profound mystical experiences are the result of the self experiencing, at depth, insights that progressively dismantle doctrinal notions, the Church's claim that such experiences confirm doctrine more a hope than a reality. Confirmation of doctrine can be had at the shallow end of contemplative experience, but that is the result of schooled expectations. Only through the removal of such expectations at depth can the ego-self find the state of psychic rest necessary for the next level of experience to register. Hence the attempt by 16th century mystics to rid their spirituality of the whims of inadequate advisers and weed out the more dubious and superstitious devotions. But there was also the problem of this spirituality having no recognisable form, and that too bred confusion among the uninitiated. Techniques for "descent" into the self as "psyche" were known to exist, but the very idea of "techniques" was anathema to the religious hierarchy - such manipulations suggested an insidious form of hubris dressed up as a religious discipline. Only devotions grounded in sound doctrine were acceptable. As an experience, the progressive "unlearning" of the mystic was deeply problematical for the Church; it involved processes beyond its ability to decipher or appreciate, and was quickly brought under ecclesiastical control. But not completely; the descent of some mystics resulted in a loosening of belief ties that deeply frightened the authorities - the cosmological cat was emerging from the theological bag and there seemed little that could be done to stop it.

Supernaturalism and Reductive Materialism

Secular humanism rightly rejects all forms of "supernaturalism"; there is no room in the

paradigm for spooky goings on. All phenomena are believed to be explicable in material terms, in terms of the human, in terms of the planet humans inhabit. For rote Christianity the supernatural lies at the heart of its thinking and is part of its experiential proof for the existence of an agency above the forces of nature. This agency is of course God, a conscious being of unlimited power who sometimes annuls the Laws of Nature with a miracle or two. To find this God all you have to do is believe what the Church says about Him, and accept that there is a grand cosmic plan in operation via the Jewish Jesus that involves your personal salvation. Or, as the case may be, your personal damnation. It is that simple; take it or leave it.

Just as problematic, however, is the tendency of secular humanism to embrace the values of hard-line reductive materialism; it leaves us with no room to manoeuvre when confronted with experiences that flatly contradict what we rationally believe should be the case. What we rationally “believe” should be the case can suddenly hit a brick wall and force us to question the rationale that absolutely everything is in the end logically explicable, the findings of quantum physics being a case in point. But does that automatically open the door to Christian supernaturalisms? Some would argue that it does - I would not. To choose reverse gear and believe that the Red Sea did open for Moses as a result of God’s handiwork, or that Jesus sailed majestically over people’s heads on his way to heaven would be to mistake what I’m getting at here. We have been conditioned by present-day, postmodern-driven secular humanism to stifle any response that even remotely questions the materialist (physicalist) conception of self and world, a conception where we are no more than event-driven biological machines. But is that really how we perceive ourselves? It’s certainly not how I perceive myself. There’s no denying that I’m fundamentally biological in make up, but I’m not a machine: I am a conscious being with capacities the half of which I’m only vaguely aware. But it has to be admitted that I do often function like a machine, particularly when concentrating on some task, or in moments of low awareness, insensitive preoccupation or blind conformity. In such moments I cease to exist to my self as a person; I am, suddenly, no more than a bundle of response mechanisms let loose on the world. But that is a hybrid state I can shake myself out of, or be shaken out of by others. Which is to say that the shallow end of secular humanist thinking is no different from the shallow end of Christian doctrinal thinking: each leaves us with a conceptual inability to unlearn our way down into the self’s depths. We are being short-changed by both parties.

Ego, Self and Being

The Homeric Greeks located their ability to think in the diaphragm: *Phrem* in ancient Greek. The physical location of the mind was thought to be just above the stomach. And

why not, disagreeable sensations in the area of the abdominal cavity often signal feelings of annoyance, fear, anger and much else in relation to what we are thinking or experiencing. So the question is this: Do we only think in our head, in our brain, or does the act of thinking extend to, and perhaps depend on, other bits of our anatomy? This suggestion could lead us into considering the density and quality of the sensations that background our every conscious act, and the fact that we are generally aware, or semi-aware, of those sensations, but I'll instead take a detour via some pertinent observations made by Don Cupitt in relation to the conscious ego and its historical development.

In alignment with the birth of secular humanism in the sixteenth century, Cupitt arrows in on the fact that everything known eventually revolved around the viewpoint of the individual. "Truth" was to be found within the human sphere; it was no longer lodged in some divine dimension. Rene Decartes' "I think, therefore I am" had gained control; even in the area of religious belief. Faith was now a "personal" decision, salvation a "personal" assurance which liberal Protestantism via Luther used to sever ties with the external authority of the Catholic Church. An anthropocentric form of Christianity was underway, and it would be joined by an experimental science and an equally experimental form of politics where absolute monarchy would give way to liberal democracy. Progressive human liberation was on the cards; consumerism was on the horizon. The self of the individual was on the verge of making all things subservient to its own needs and desires.

In terms of mysticism remaining pertinent as an experience aligned with the self's depths, and not just with the ego's needs and desires, Cupitt's overall argument annuls the possibility of psyche (soul?) having a significant role to play in the affair of knowledge, and truth. To clinch his argument, Cupitt refers to Stephen Katz's 1978 symposium 'Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis', and with a flourish tells us that "people quickly acknowledged that religious experiences are everywhere couched in the locally available symbolic vocabulary." Every religious experience is a "datable human cultural expression." It is language all the way down. There is neither meaning nor cognition prior to language. The Western philosophical tradition has been naive in its handling of this question, we are told, the notion that there can be "extra-linguistic experience, knowledge and truth" an anomaly that continues in some quarters to this day. Language is now the new supernatural force in our lives; it has replaced the old supernatural world and calls upon us to acknowledge its presence in all that we do and think.

Language is God

Stephen Katz's 1978 evaluation of mysticism has been slammed by the cognitive

philosopher Bruce Mangan as “applying the most standard, narrow and lifeless forms of analytic/linguistic philosophy to mystic utterances” in an attempt to denigrate depth experience. For Mangan, “experience”, not “language”, should be seen as primary in any discussion of mysticism. Mystical experiences are “evocative” rather than “descriptive”, and in this sense they are not subject to the formative and constructive processes of language and culture. Things are otherwise for Cupitt: mystical utterances are either a disguised form of subversion, or meaningless because not recognisably propositional. We have come to ignore the “strange, magical world of symbolic meanings [that] holds the common world, the world of human life, in the hollow of its hands.” Unless I’m very much mistaken, Cupitt is telling us here that language is God, that we are, as we once were with God, in language’s steely grip and can’t escape. The world is no more than a language event. Problem is, Cupitt also tells us that meditative “unlearning” is a melting away of false dualisms, a way down to the most perfect happiness in the purest Emptiness. That is a telling description; it adds a contradictory element to his debunking of mystical experience. I say this because “unlearning” belongs to a level of descent experience where the overreaching ego’s desire to “suck the world dry” (Cupitt’s own words in a different context) is momentarily suspended. Reduce all “knowing” to the level of language construction and you end up with an ego incapable of appreciating that “unlearning” can carry one down into the depths of the self *as* psyche, a journey carrying serious implications in itself. But only if one persists: meditative descent is a discipline of mind in relation to psyche, it is not something one toys with and prematurely dumps.

This takes us back to *Phrem* and “diaphragm” as an alternative location for mind, or as an anatomical extension of mind. For as noted earlier, the abdominal cavity is the seat of sensation, and these sensations background our interaction with self, other and world. There is a subjective level to experience allied to conscious awareness that adds a subtle, sensation-based undertow to our thinking, an undertow without which our thinking, as an experience, is rendered curiously flat and sterile. In fact it is now claimed that without this subjective undertow we would be incapable of registering meaning. And there is, it seems, a specific brain mechanism for this undertow, a biological support mechanism that generates emotional content in relation to our thinking and doing. Remove or damage this mechanism and we end up deprived of an emotional context for what we experience that renders meaning meaningless and our own sense of self-meaning debilitated. The whole point of having sensation-backed mental processes is to add qualitatively to what we experience. But a question looms: What does it mean to *feel* something?

The *feeling of meaning* that accompanies words can be removed through repetition: repetition empties meaningful words of the meanings they are supposed to carry. Remove or reduce felt meaning and we are immediately disabled in terms of

comprehension. Swap cognition's foreground for its background through creative absorption, or through meditation, and a state of exceptional understanding verging on mystical epiphany erupts. We are, as the psychologists Bresnick and Levin note, meaningful in and to ourselves beyond the limitations of language's symbolic forms, evaluative feeling in relation to being constituting a *screen of meaning* that imbues those forms with the sense of meaning their individual meanings carry. Meanings in the general sense of meanings are without doubt hatched out of external signs and symbols by way of conscious manipulation, not so 'felt meaning': the *feeling* of meaning that accompanies meanings resides in our psychophysical depths alone. The guiding force in psyche is not, therefore, the temporal-bound, easily distracted, language-bound conscious mind, or ego-complex, it is, when given sufficient rein, *psyche* itself, that within which, and through which, we move and have our being. This is not to make psyche into God, it is to place psyche at the transition point between self, other and world and recognise its inherent capacity for experiences that transcend our present understanding of self, other and world. In this sense 'transcendence' is the full actualising of mind in relation to what we are in our psychophysical depths. It is Don Cupitt's astutely described state of "unlearning" (the suspension of *false dualisms*) properly established and sustained, and it is primary, *not* secondary.

Bibliography:

- Armstrong, Karen, *The Battle for God*, Harper Perennial, U.K., 200.
- Bergson, Henri, *The Creative Mind*, The Philosophical Library, New York, 1934.
- Bresnick, Todd and Ross Levin, 'Fringe Consciousness and Personality', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 9, 2006.
- Bricklin, J., 'Consciousness Already There Waiting to be Discovered': "William James' Mystical Suggestions as Corroborated by Himself and his Contemporaries", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 11-12, 2010.
- Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, U.K., 1998.
- Einstein, Albert, *The World As I see It*. A Harris trans. New York: Philosophical Library, 1949.
- James, William, *A Pluralistic Universe*: William James, Writings 1902-1910, New York, Library of America.
A Suggestion About Mysticism. William James, Writings, 1902-1910, New York, Library of America, 1987.
The Principles of Psychology: William James, Writings, 1902-1910, New York, Library of America.
The Varieties of Religious Experience: William James: Writings 1902-1910, New York, Library of America, 1987.
- John, St., of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, Book Two.
- Klinger, Eric, "Response Organization of Mental Imagery, Evaluation of Descriptive Experience, Sampling, and Alternatives", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol 18, No. 1, 2011.
- Lacey, A. R., *Bergson*. Routledge, London and New York, 1989.
- Lawrence, D. H., *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, edited with an introduction by Edward D. McDonald, William Heinemann, Ltd, 1936.
- Mangan, Bruce, 'Language & Experience in the Cognitive Study of Mysticism': *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 1, No 2, 1994.

Perry R. B., (Ed), *The Thought and Character of William James*, (2 volumes)
 Boston, Little Brown, 1935.
 Sartre, John Paul, *L'etre et le neant*.
 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*

Don Cupitt's 'Unlearning Self' Considered

(Part Two)

Don Cupitt's 'Unlearning Self' Considered

Douglas Lockhart

Man comports himself everywhere to objects, ie., to what stands over and against him . . . Man is the living being that, by way of representation, fastens upon objects and thus looks upon what is objective, and in looking, orders objects, and in this ordering posits back to himself the ordering as something mastered, as his possession.

Martin Heidegger
Parmenides

. . . The human intellect feels at home among inanimate objects, more especially among solids, where our action finds its fulcrum and our industry its tools; that our concepts have been formed on the model of solids; that our logic is, pre-eminently, the logic of solids.

Henri Bergson
Creative Evolution

The Phenomenology of Mysticism

The most important statement on mystical experience by the 19th century psychologist

CUPITT'S "UNLEARNING SELF" CONSIDERED
 ©2019 Douglas Lockhart :: www.DouglasLockhart.com

William James' is that: "the existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe." Our conscious egos may have decided that mystical states have little or nothing to offer in terms of real meaning, but they may in fact herald another way of "knowing" that opens up as yet unimaginable avenues of research and discovery. But if James was anything, he was a scientist, and as a scientist he carefully balanced himself between the fascinations of mysticism and the possibility of falling into its abyss-like quality without a safety harness.

Concerning the nature of the self, James insisted that linear time was built out of a "going away" and a "coming towards" with the present sandwiched between the two as a kind of darkness, a point of infinitesimal fleetingness postulated rather than known. The nearer the past or future were experientially, the easier they were to accommodate, the further away they were the more difficult they were to accommodate. Past and future in the immediate sense were "feelings" separated from one another by an illusionary present; whereas in their more distant form they were "conceptual" events. In this sense the present was the equivalent of the space between frames in a film - it had no actual existence beyond inference. We teeter on the edge of this psychic darkness in moments of deep thought or reverie, and overtly experience it when giving into the desire to sleep. Sleep, as a condition of mind, is not as ordinary as we may think; it is in itself an altered state of consciousness within which dreams tease us with their incorrigibly creative content.

The Self's Inherent Darkness

The present as a kind of darkness is a confronting description of the space in which we claim to spend at least half of our lives, and it demands further explanation. Alas, such an explanation is not easily come by. We are left to wonder where exactly the conscious self is supposed to exist, its sense of the present moment being described as no more than a series of perceived changes related to our apprehension of past and future. Question is, how does one get such a rich, back grounding sense of self-continuity out of past/future discontinuity? According to James, our notion of the self as a continuous event in linear time is an illusion caused by the collapsing of the immediate past and the immediate future into one another.

We do not first feel one and then the other after it, and from the perception of the succession infer an interval of time between, but we seem to feel the interval of time as a whole with its two ends embedded in it.

This suggests that our conscious lives are founded on a simultaneous sensing of past and future, a “pulsing” between both at such speed that the gap, or darkness, between frames is mostly hidden from us. And so the film rolls, and we act out each frame of our lives as if time and self constitute a seamless continuity. But there are times of dislocation, moments when we are thrust nearer to the self’s inherent interstices darkness through sadness, grief or suffering. In such moments time seems to stand still; it is as if past and future are being held in suspension, as if one is holding one’s psychic breath. Such moments are unusual, and they often afford useful insights. In such moments past and future cease to be separate events cleverly streamed by the brain; they collapse into one another as actual experience and combine to offer moments of deep significance. It is as if psyche is examining itself from a perceptual vantage point where “everything” is available in a single glance. Linearity of mind ceases; as in dream, mental processes become extraordinarily fluid. If practiced in gaining entrance to this space, then capable of triggering a state of mind where psyche seems to communicate with self in a sometimes electrifying manner. Herein lies that enlargement of the conscious field James describes as leading to “a curious sense of cognition of real ‘fact’”, a sudden, unexpected engagement of mind with psyche as a whole. And so James can write from experience:

The mode of consciousness was perceptual, not conceptual - the field expanding so fast that there seemed no time for conception or identification to get in its work. There was a strongly exciting sense that my knowledge of past (or present?) reality was enlarging pulse by pulse, but so rapidly that my intellectual processes could not keep up the pace. The content was thus entirely lost to retrospection - it sank into the limbo into which dreams vanish as we gradually awake. The feeling - I won’t call it belief - that I had a sudden opening, and had seen through a window, as it were, distant realities that incomprehensibly belonged with my own life, was so acute that I can not shake it off to-day.

Don Cupitt would have a field day with this quote; it appears to confirm his belief that nothing at all is rescuable from a mystical state of mind. But that is not the case. This strange experience radically changed James’ thinking on a number of levels, and that in itself opens out into the question of what a mystical experience actually does to the experiencer. It isn’t that nothing was communicated to James; it is that what was communicated was assimilated by a self that had undergone radical change in how information was being processed. On this score there is a wealth of information in this quote, information that explains not what was comprehended, but how it was comprehended, and what resulted from the experience.

First thing to spot is that the mode of consciousness was “perceptual”, not “conceptual” - that clearly identifies the process as *insightful*. It was also a rapidly

expanding process of insightfulness that his conscious mind could not cope with, hence his inability to consciously register details later. But not altogether beyond description: there was a sense of having glimpsed "distant realities" that incomprehensibly belonged with his life, and this feeling did not diminish with time. So not only was the experience had at another level of comprehension and assimilation, it was also an encounter with his own depths that radically shifted his opinions about self, other and world.

Noetic Experience

Unlike Don Cupitt, James is not put off by ineffability; mystical experiences at depth are for him meaningful in their own right; they are neither nonsense or disguised seminars on subversion. They are "noetic" in quality (of the intellect; purely intellectual or abstract), and as such signal states of knowledge "unplumbed by the discursive intellect." The use of "purely intellectual" in this context sounds like a contradiction in terms, but as he himself says, it is not the discursive intellect he is referring to, more a state of "pure abstraction" (pure cognition?) beyond the surface intellect's capacity to plumb, an altogether different level, or dimension, of "being" from the one we are used to experiencing. At what might be termed "subterranean depths", insights of extraordinary delicacy replace normal acts of cognition: another sense is at work, a sense the offerings of which nevertheless constitute a form of knowledge in spite of their being non-propositional. Cupitt has a perfect right to question this form of knowledge, but his dismissal of it is a little too quick, a little too *neat*. At this deep cognitive level "knowing" can be legitimately described as *knowledge without attachment*, and that's the key to understanding what's going on here. Knowledge without "attachment" is not "not-knowing"; it is knowing minus *ego-engagement*. Ego cannot help but cognitively grasp at the world via perception, whereas an ego that has "unlearned" its way down into psyche's depths through "practice" exhibits perceptual transparency. There are no cognitive "hooks" in perceptual transparency; it is, as the philosopher Edmund Husserl contended, devoid of ego-grasping, a little something that his pupil Martin Heidegger never quite fathomed.

The Spanish mystic St John of the Cross captures something of this non-attached state when he says: "And thus, even though the soul might have a great desire to express it and might find ways in which to describe it, it would still be secret and remain undescribed." Deep meditation is, in essence, a trance state, an *entranced state* that affords access to unsuspected dimensions of being, perhaps even to dimensions of experience beyond personal being.

In 'Consciousness Already There', the psychologist J. Bricklin draws our attention to the rapid expansion of James' perceptual field during his quasi-mystical experience,

and suggests that such a field could theoretically convert vast temporal successions into space-like simultaneities not unlike those reported in near death experiences. Similarly, James homed in on the idea of perceptual simultaneities in the *Principles* when he drew attention to Mozart's ability to compose, not by way of successive creative moves in time, but *all at once* as in a beautiful strong dream". (my italics) All at once? Successive creative moves NOT in time? In trying to describe mystical experience, James inches his way into this phenomenon when he suggests that perhaps "[e]very bit of us at every moment is part and parcel of . . . some more really central self which is co-conscious with the whole of us".

This takes us back to the problem of how objective and subjective states of mind relate one to the other, for in making mind an epiphenomenon of the physical brain, psychology has relegated our sense of sentience to the periphery of human experience and left us all but bereft of an existential core. The significance of being an alive, breathing, thinking, relating human being has all but evaporated in the rational attempt to prove that we are essentially no more than a linguistic biofeedback loop. Every trace of 19th-century idealism has been dismissed as irrational, the subjective element in all objective mental events interpreted as an underlying opposition to those events from out of which magico-religious experiences and beliefs can sprout like weeds. In this scheme subjectivity is the opposite of objectivity because conceived in objective terms, the fundamental coordination between these states being conceptually invisible. In *Truth and Method*, Hans-Georg Gadamer correctly sums up the nature of this problem when he says ". . . we can certainly examine and analyse [the unity of a living organism] from outside, but can understand only if we go back to its hidden roots". Then, quoting Husserl's philosophical objection to Hume's notion of subjectivity as the opposite pole of objectivity, he adds:

The naiveté of talk about 'objectivity' which completely ignores experiencing, knowing subjectivity, subjectivity which performs real, concrete achievements, the naiveté of the scientist concerned with nature, with the world in general, who is blind to the fact that all the truths that he acquires as objective, and the objective world itself that is the substratum in his formulas is his own life construct that has grown within him, is, of course, no longer possible, when life comes on the scene.

In this context "life" is used to express the whole of existence as an experience, an experience that includes people and their involvement with one another. This identifies life with the subjective domain, a domain of mind described by Gadamer as a "primal I" (Ur-Ich) on which the conscious mind as "inquiring I" is dependent for its capacity to objectify self, other and world. So is this William James' elusive and mysterious self which could be sensed at or behind the innermost subjective pole of our ongoing

conscious experience? Is this hidden self an atemporal zone of awareness where “intentionality” takes on a new, deeper significance? A “life” is simultaneously historical and subjectively personal, a realm within which an elaborate tapestry of events take place and experiences are had. But as noted above, it is more than that: it is also that from out of which objectivity emerges. Human subjectivity is not merely that within which objectivity is housed; it is that without which objectivity cannot arise. Subjectivity should not be conceived as an opposite pole to objectivity; that is to conceive of subjectivity in limited objective terms and inadvertently disable it. Hence the problem of trying to deal with verbal and non-verbal categories of mind. Non-verbal experience does not lie at the opposite end of some graduated mental spectrum, it is an enmeshed condition of psyche where language as an integral component of mind constantly attempts, in relation to intentionality, to transcend its own limitations. Why so? Because language’s inbuilt limitations automatically cause an ongoing questioning of self, other or world to occur, and that questioning is deeply related to, and perhaps even responsible for, psychological and physical health.

Pure Reflection

William James, according to Bricklin's study, had lost what Einstein called the "reference body" around which “successive, linear perspective is constructed”, and in this sense it was diffusion of the self that allowed this special state of consciousness to arise. A “transmarginal panorama” of experience is available to those who lose the “narrow field of consciousness-arrayed-around-a-reference-body-self”. This seems to resonate with John Paul Sartre’s notion of “pure reflection” in which everything is given at once, but that would be to draw the wrong conclusion. Sartre contended that in pure reflection nothing is ever learned or discovered, and that drops the whole issue back into Cupitt’s camp where only the discursive intellect can deal in knowing something. Problem is, we’re not actually dealing with "knowing" something in this sense; we’re dealing with perception disconnected from the ego's need to grasp and manipulate. The experience of consciousness "as a whole" delivers *everything at once*, and that requires a very different kind of observer. Henri Bergson captures what is going on here when he says:

[O]nly to a superficial inspection does consciousness consist of a sequence of distinct conscious states. To a more profound investigation, consciousness reveals itself as a continuity of mutually permeating states that form an organic whole . . . the true life of consciousness cannot be caught in our conceptual network. It will always overflow our artificial demarcations and distinctions.

According to the linguistic specialist Jordan Zlatev, consciousness must involve sentience, the presence of phenomenal experience for the being that possesses it. Without here-and-now experience, language itself could not exist, so making some deeper form of consciousness a necessary precondition for language. In alignment with this observation, Zlatev suggests that if “all ‘higher-order’ consciousness [was] based on language . . . then the foundational role of consciousness would not run very deep.” In Zlatev’s scheme consciousness is always to some degree self-aware in a non-thematic way. Which suggests that all meta-mentations (forms of thought involving self, other or world as secondary, objectified acts of attention) are embedded in cognitive-mentations (instances where we relate to ourselves as living organisms through primary acts of attention), and that these states are not isolated one from the other. Zlatev goes on to develop a highly sophisticated argument in relation to how all of this works out in human experience, but what concerns us here is his apparent blending of meta-mentations with cognitive-mentations, a factor unaddressed by Don Cupitt. For Cupitt, the unconscious is by definition a biological substrate lacking coherence in terms of meaning. Zlatev agrees to the extent that this deep substrate cannot be experienced by first-person methods, but in having allowed “sentience” to be an intrinsic part of consciousness, he raises the issue of objective consciousness being an unlikely outcome without an active unconscious element, and in doing so raises the question of what “active” may mean in this context.

William James went further still, describing perceptual, cognitive, and volitional activity as emanating from “an elusive and mysterious self which [could] often be sensed at or behind the innermost subjective pole of our ongoing conscious experience.” Hence James’ definition of psychology as a “person-centred field”, and consciousness as a “plurality of states”; an approach that allowed him to question the then emerging “unexamined assumptions of radical materialism” that inadvertently chopped consciousness up into bits and rendered language the only force capable of creating order out of perceptual chaos. This very point is made by the transpersonal psychologist Ken Wilber in *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (1977) where he speaks of linguistic processes that slice up reality and unconsciously introduce “dualisms that we then naively imagine have existed all along.” Governed as we are by dualistic language, we end up more or less convinced that reality (even our own subjective reality) is similarly constructed. And so “a pernicious violence is perpetrated upon nature” and we find ourselves conforming to a linguistically constructed version of reality populated by a fictitious matrix of distinctions. Naively unconscious of what our reliance on the logic of language is doing to our world, and to ourselves, we fall into the trap where conscious differentiation as a mode of thinking pushes the back grounding influence of psyche (the all pervasive, non-local, undifferentiated underbelly of the conscious mind) to the far end of a theoretical mental spectrum that does not in fact exist.

Bibliography:

- Heidegger, Martin, *Parmenides, trans & intro by Albert Hofstadter, Perennial Classics 2001.*
- Bergson, Henri, *Creative Evolution, Macmillan, London 1954.*
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Lloyd, *Continuum*, London 2006.
- James, William, *A Pluralistic Universe: William James, Writings 1902-1910*, New York, Library of America.
- 'A Suggestion About Mysticism'. William James, Writings, 1902-1910, New York, Library of America, 1987.
- The Principles of Psychology: William James, Writings, 1902-1910*, New York, Library of America.
- The Varieties of Religious Experience: William James: Writings 1902-1910*, New York, Library of America, 1987.
- Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, U.K. 1998.
- Bricklin, J., 'Consciousness Already There Waiting to be Discovered': "William James' Mystical Suggestions as Corroborated by Himself and his Contemporaries", *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 11-12, 2010.
- Wilber, Ken, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, A Quest Book, US 1982.
- Zahavi, Dan, 'Varieties of Reflection', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2011.

Don Cupitt's 'Unlearning Self' Considered

(Part Three)

Don Cupitt's 'Unlearning Self' Considered

Douglas Lockhart

The lifting of the behaviourist tabu on serious discussion of our inner life has released a remarkable flood of interest, a fertile crop of new suggestions which surely needs to be cherished and developed as widely as possible. . . What now seems possible is that we can reverse the irrational change which took place a century back, when behaviourism was allowed to drive out a range of psychological enquires of the kind pursued by Dewey and William James.

Mary Midgley
'Being Scientific About Our Selves'

The Problem of Non-verbal Experience

There is no escaping the fact that all forms of thinking, even mystical thinking, ends up in language: everything “known” is at base linguistic. It is of course claimed that religion cannot be wholly encompassed by language, and that mystic experiences, when articulated, carry intimations of non-verbal experience expressed as intuitions or insights. The question that arises here is this: what is a non-verbal experience if, as claimed by many philosophers, we cannot conceive of that for which we have no words? This point is amply illustrated by the fact that if I lacked the words with which to articulate this very notion, it would never form. Which would be the end of the matter but for one thing: how can notions that do not foundationally exist in psyche suddenly exist and take on meaning through language? Our articulations are not “ideal” (sculpted out of nothing) in the sense that God’s ideal articulations are said to have been at the Creation; they are Adam’s in the sense of naming, in language, what is already there. Question is, what does “already there” mean in relation to language? By what means can language as a late development conjure into existence what mind has no intrinsic sense of? What could possibly be the trigger for such an extraordinary state of mental affairs apart from our being, in the deepest and most disturbing sense, no more than a linguistic program with delusions of grandeur? Is mind, by definition, language and no more than language? Is sense of self no more than a constantly self-referencing linguistic construct? Or is language itself a form

of computer program used by mind as Jerzy Grotowski has suggested in his radical explorations of the meaning of theatre. Grotowski's line of reasoning is as follows:

. . . the best word would be awareness, that is, a consciousness which is not linked to language, to the functioning of the computer, but to presence. Certainly, one could also say that awareness is linked to the mind, but in such a case, surely, this refers to another mind. In it, there is a meeting with the heart, with the domain of the soul, of the emotions, but in this case distinct from the soup of projections, repulsions, and attachments. It is of the same domain, but much higher and, at this point, there no longer exists a perceptible difference between the higher "psyche" and this higher "mind". The two aspects are very linked and perhaps identical.

The current view is that human beings graduated, gradually, from an undifferentiated state of mind to that of a differentiated state via the development of language, and that that is the end of the mind's developmental journey. Through language we have gained meaningful access to self, other and world, there being no third, non-verbal state that can potentially serve a higher purpose. Non-verbal states can of course arise, but they are by definition "meaningless" in that meanings cannot form beyond the confines of language.

Before tackling how verbal and non-verbal states may be conjoined, there are a few things that have to be got out of the way. In *The Edges of Language*, Paul van Buren contends that we cannot avoid bringing language to the table of understanding: language is in our very bones. Our responses to music can certainly be "non-verbal", but only if we say nothing about them to anyone, including ourselves. Non-verbal experience, stresses Buren "is itself imbedded in our linguistic world, for it is the experience of linguistic beings." We have, in other words, a linguistically based apprehension of the world that cannot be shaken off even when silent within ourselves.

But language is not all powerful; it has its limitations. There are rules that have to be obeyed, conventions and agreements without which language cannot function. We are nevertheless constantly in the grip of language; we cannot escape its complex influence. We may have little knowledge of its internal logic, but we can only misuse it up to a point: ignore the need to refine our use of language as a tool of mind and our ability to communicate with others and with ourselves will falter. We are, whether we like it or not, linguistic beings to our core. Which raises the question of what an "experience" is, for isn't experience a core thing, a "happening" prior to anything we may say or think? Paul van Buren does not dispute core experience, what he disputes is the rather narrow view we have of language. Language, he argues, need not be a precise description of anything: poetry and metaphor belie that belief. We do not always speak in precise terms. We also "hint" at things, make "indirect" points, or "talk around" a subject. Which tells

us that language can fray at the edges and become less and less distinct, indeed, become so indistinct as to become meaningless. And so, in the final analysis, Buren can say: “there are no non-verbal experiences, if by that is meant experiences about which nothing at all is or can be said.” Which makes sense in a brutally logical kind of way. Such reasoning is however not easily dismissed; it presents us with a difficult to refute case for there being no superior vantage point beyond language, all attempts to do so being done, as they have to be done, through the auspices of language. Which brings us to what the outer limit of language is as defined by language, and in Buren’s terms that is where “we fall into a misuse of words, into nonsensical jabbering, into the void where the rules [of language] give out.” Which tells us that there is also a central, no-nonsense area of language where senseless jabbering is less likely to occur.

This central area is where we spend most of our time, but we do on occasions venture beyond its rule-laden, socially-acceptable confines and attempt to stretch or extend how language is used. In such moments we experience language as problematical; we search for words to explain ourselves, or produce unusual word combinations in an attempt to express what is getting more and more difficult to pin down. For a brief moment language may lose touch with its rule base and thrust us either towards potential absurdity or, as can also be the case, creative brilliance. This either/or situation depends wholly to what extent we have become sensitised to how language functions in relation to itself, and to how we ourselves function in relation to language. Language embedded in reactive emotion, for instance, seldom accomplishes anything, whereas language embedded in evaluative feeling is almost always creative. This tells us something about our emotional natures that we may not have noticed: "emotion" and "feeling" constitute a natural polarity; they are not one and the same thing; and that in spite of their often seamlessly grading into one another. Emotive language is by nature reactive, unpredictable and potentially destructive; feeling-evaluative language is explorative, creatively adventurous and constructive. There can of course be an element of each in the other, but creative excitement is altogether different from what is experienced when emotional language rules the roost.

The safe, central plateau of language is of course limiting in that it reflects a limited world of stale orderliness where, as Buren puts it, flat, unimaginative beings while away their existence. Little in the way of language-stretching takes place here; all is in accordance with a day-to-day use of concepts that seldom make any kind of mental demand.

Cupitt’s Arrows

Don Cupitt is of much the same opinion as Buren when it comes to language and non-verbal experience, particularly in relation to mystical experience. Writing as a postmodernist, Cupitt the philosopher and religious reformer makes short work of any attempt to elevate non-verbal experience beyond what he describes as “psychic mush”. It is language all the way down for Cupitt; meaningfulness *as such* did not exist for human beings prior to the development of language. If this were all Cupitt had to say on the matter, I would have settled for Paul van Buren’s thorough investigation of the same problem, but that is not Cupitt’s way. He drives his postmodernist spike into the question of non-verbal experience and emerges from the fray advocating “extra-linguistic experience, knowledge and truth” to be a comforting myth of the Western intellectual tradition. Disillusioned with the whole idea of “unitive states, timelessness and immediate knowledge”, he drops almost all mystical claims into the bucket marked “nonsense”, interprets what’s left as subversive of Church authority, and draws a strict line of demarcation between modernity and postmodernity: modernity is now conceived as old-fashioned and full of misconceptions about self, other and world. We have been fooling ourselves for far too long, he tells us; it’s time to wake up into the world as it really is, not as we have imagined it to be.

There is a subtle difference between what Paul van Buren advocates, and what Don Cupitt advocates. In Cupitt’s scheme a postmodern approach to non-verbal experience is a rejection of 19th-century modernism’s notion that such experiences might constitute a source of knowledge uncontaminated by language. For Buren the situation is more nuanced: he perceives the indistinct outer edge of language as potentially creative as well as potentially dangerous, and only meaningless when that outer edge is traversed. That is of course to agree with Cupitt, but it is also to posit a point beyond the safe, central plateau of language where mind can break with what Buren describes as *stale orderliness and flat, unimaginative thinking*. Which raises the question of what that creative outer edge of language is in itself if, as Buren states, it is a point where language begins to falter and becomes indistinct. Why should an approach to that outer rim of language result in originality of thought? Could it be, however, that Buren and Cupitt are simultaneously correct and incorrect in their assessment of language and its role in psyche? Could it be that language not only goes all the way down as they contend, but that at depth it no longer functions in the way surface, plateau language functions? Or, for that matter, how it functions at its creative outer edge? Is there a point where language begins to function in a more extended fashion, where it ceases to be mind deliberating on “bits” and becomes psyche embracing “wholes” as William James suggests? That, after all, is what creativity is; it is a grasping of something beyond individual parts, an appreciation of something that extends itself in multiple directions without apparent effort. So-called “non-verbal” experience may not signify a meaningless state of mind at

all; it may more accurately reflect a state of mind where subjective cognitions *displace cognitions that take other objects of attention as their focal point*. Language as we have come to understand it may not seem to be at work, but it may only have changed in its behaviour. In this sense non-verbal experience in its creative upper reaches – Grotowski’s “higher psyche” - is neither linguistically empty nor meaningless, just invisible to itself.

The Poles of Undifferentiated Experience

Which brings us to Benny Shanon, Professor of Psychology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whose research in the phenomenology of human consciousness and the philosophy of psychology has marked him out as a frontier thinker. Working also in the domains of psycholinguistics, the semantics and pragmatics of natural language, and with thought processes and creativity, Shanon the all-rounder offers “a new perspective for cognitive psychology as a science and a re-appraisal of its aims and the intellectual challenge it presents.”

For our purposes it is his paper 'A Psychological Theory of Consciousness' that is of interest, for in it he presents a step by step exposition of his own thinking over the years, and develops a highly useful theoretical approach to the study of consciousness in terms of a three-tier system. Three theoretical levels of consciousness are postulated: (1) sensed being or sentience, (2) mental awareness, and (3) meta-mentations. These are in turn labeled Cons/1 Cons/2 and Cons/3. As “sensed being” (Cons/1) has no specific structure, does not exhibit differentiation, and is all pervasive and non-local, it is by definition beyond definition. On having admitted this, Shanon does however attempt one further clarification: Cons/1 is there during *all* of our lives and constitutes *the foundation for a next higher stage*. This next stage is of course Cons/2, or “mental awareness”, and it is composed of “subjective experiences that are distinct and differentiated.” Here resides our inner dialogue, our mental images, our dreams, our stream of articulated thought, indeed everything of which we are aware, everything that is well-defined and well-formed. This is followed by Cons/3, or “meta-mentations”, a level of mind where objects of attention are subjected to further reflection, even reflection on the process of reflection itself. Meta-mentations are however sometimes confused with the experience of “self-awareness”, warns Shanon, but they are in fact quite different in make up.

Shanon is at pains to point out that meta-mentations are not cognitive-mentations; meta-mentations involve one in one’s own cognitive activities (thinking and talking, etc), and as such carry one away from the experience of self as a living organism. Reflection on self, and self-awareness, are therefore different levels of cognition for Shanon.

Cognitive-mentations (sense of being; sense of one's existence *as* a being) are always to some degree present in meta-mentations, whereas meta-mentations (reflection on objects of attention, even on reflection itself) are not fundamental to cognitive-mentations. This is an important point, and in a footnote to his paper Shanon develops it one step further: meta-cognitions, he contends, are not the sole criteria for our being conscious. Which suggests that the word “conscious” is in itself problematical, there being the possibility that “conscious” could also apply to “sense of being” (cognitive-mentation) in spite of there being no “knowing” element in the experience.

To “know” something is the general definition of what it means to be consciously aware, but as pointed out by Shanon, William James’s use of “consciousness” and “sciousness” (1890/1950) tantalisingly suggests there may be a form of knowing that does not knowingly entail having an object of attention as its focus. This curious state of internal affairs leads to an interesting double question: is “self-consciousness” actually consciousness of self, and is “consciousness of self and world” the final arbiter of what it means to be a conscious human being? Shanon is particularly clear on this point. He says, “It should be noted that for some investigators reflection and self-awareness are the critical features of consciousness”. This makes the mind’s ability to reflect on its own existence, and on the existence of all other elements of inner/outer reality the yardstick by which we have to gauge mind as being conscious, and that, for Shanon, is too narrow a definition. In this context, he says, “I favour a dynamic picture whereby the different types (Cons/1, 2 & 3) may co-exist and which displays a constant flux between them.” Why should this be the case? Because just as Cons/3 is dependent on Cons/2 for its extended functioning, so also must Cons/3 and Cons/2 be dependent on Cons/1 as a supporting substrate. While appearing conceptually and structurally distinct, that is, theoretically separated for the purpose of analysis, they are nevertheless an integrated whole sharing “content” in unexpected combinations. Consciousness is then a system of dynamic alternatives, not a fixed, static hierarchy with “meaning” isolated in its upper, conscious reaches.

To say that Don Cupitt’s and Paul Buren’s scheme of mind is different from that of Benny Shanon’s would be to state the obvious. In their scheme the subjective, non-verbal, undifferentiated substrate of personal experience carries no significance in terms of meaning: it is no more than biological white-noise - Cupitt’s *psychic mush*. Beyond language the possibility of understanding anything is conceived as impossible, the outer edge of language perceived as a place where meanings progressively deteriorate into gibberish. All “knowing” is necessarily conscious, reflective, and subject to pre-existing categories of meaning, the notion that it can be otherwise a sad dependency on modernist theories which post-modernist thinking has shown to be inadequate.

As noted by Buren, however, that outer edge is also the place where real creativity takes place, the area where surprising and unexpected “combinations of thought” can materialise. Shanon, too, is aware that his tripartite system cannot fully account for non-ordinary states of consciousness such as those attained through solitude, meditation, sensory deprivation and fasting. But he has not always been of this opinion; he admits to having argued in earlier papers that such states were only extended acts of meta-cognition, no more than meta-mentation layers of reflection on reflection further up the chain of awareness. Shanon has however changed his mind. Clinical research into powerful psychoactive potions have revealed facets of mind that are entirely new and unexpected, forms of thinking that have radically changed the way in which Shanon views self, mind and consciousness. Creating a wholly new mental cartography in subsequent papers, and in his book *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Shanon challenges the postmodernist approach to mental functioning and adds two extra levels to his tripartite system. These are Cons/4, where mentations are experienced as being generated by something other than one’s own mind, and Cons/5 where states of mind lacking objects of cognitively grasped attention can be “linked with mystical experiences and with distinctions made in the literature on mysticism.” Such experiences often defy words and concepts, and can be characterised as ineffable, although not all fit neatly into the category marked “real” mysticism. On the whole, however, Cons/5 experiences had as a result of psychoactive influence often mirrored visions described in classical mystical literature.

Shanon’s analysis of experiences had at Cons/4 and Cons/5 is thorough and extensive, but at this point I’m much more interested in his observation that Cons/5 only *seems* to correspond to Cons/1 in that both are automatically *presumed* to be undifferentiated, elemental experiential states at opposite ends of our mental system. Yet they are not the same thing, he contends. At one end we have the undifferentiated primitive quality of sentience, and at the other a graded diminishing of differentiated experience into non-ordinary experience between Cons/4 and Cons/5. So what is the actual difference between the two polar states? Well, it’s basically this: As Cons/2 is a clinically observable progression built on Cons/1, Cons/3 a progression built on Cons/2, and Cons/4 a progression on Cons/3 in terms of creativity, then by definition Cons/5 ought to be a progression from Cons/4 and not a retrogression back to Cons/1. Cons/5 would then not be a return to an undifferentiated, primal state, but a move *beyond* both differentiation and undifferentiation as normally understood. Hence Shanon’s use of the term “non-ordinary state of mind” to describe what lies between Cons/4 and Cons/5, for it is there on the hinge between those states that high-grade creativity sets in as observed by Buren, and where non-ordinary phenomenological patterns, visions and mystical

encounters erupt. Cons/1 underpins all of it, that's a given, but should not to be presumed to constitute this state's fundamental nature.

On Being Able to Be

The feeling of being a particular kind of organism or agent is sometimes present over and above the feeling of having sensory experiences, it's just that we are not consciously aware of the difference between these overlapping states and fail to recognise the transition. Some kind of effort is required to lift us out of the one and into the other beyond chance encounter, and that effort is dependent on our waking up out of constantly engaged thinking and doing to the extent that we recognise our plight and act on it. But we have to recognise our plight. To have meaning, effective self-meaning, the difference between being in existence and having sensory experiences has to consciously register on us. We have to notice the change in rhythm, the change in focus, the subtle change in perception that takes place as we cognitively *come back to ourselves* and immediately dive back into an engaged frame of mind. If we fail to detect this moment of emergence, this interstices point in our having 'self-presence', or in our *not having self-presence*, then we will fail to understand the question of being that Being poses, the question we embody, the question that transcends mind and body yet reveals itself through mind and body. This is the interpretation I prefer to place on the philosopher Martin Heidegger's insightful term "the call of conscience", and in this sense it may constitute the sense of existential unease, or anxiety, most of us attempt to ignore throughout our lives: the beckoning of Being present in each engagement-laden moment.

Bibliography:

- Midgley, Mary, 'Being Scientific About Ourselves', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 6. (part four) April 1999.
- Grotowski, Jerzy, 'A Kind of Volcano', an essay in *Gurdjieff*, edited by Jacob Needleman and George Baker, Continuum, New York 1996.
- Buren, Paul van, *The Edges of Language*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1972.
- Cupitt, Don, *Mysticism after Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers, UK 1998.
- James, William, 'A Suggestion about Mysticism' in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, New York, Library of America 1987.
- Shanon, Benny, 'A Psychological Theory of Consciousness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 5 2008; *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York 2002; 'Ayahuasca Visualizations: A Structural Typology', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 2002.

