

Lucid Consciousness & 'Attention'

by: Douglas Lockhart

"Immersed in the ideas of this first chapter, I am rarely conscious even of where I am."

Eric Schwitzgebel

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Waking Up to Waking Up

Questions concerning mind, awareness and consciousness are edging us ever closer to an unexpected, and in many quarters unwanted, truce with Christianity. Not the Christianity we are all familiar with, but the one termed "lost" by the philosopher Jacob Needleman. Satisfying as consensus Christianity is for many, it falls short of what is required in relation to a future where different forms of religious extremism threaten the very fabric of our individual lives.

Enter Eric Schwitzgebel, associate professor of philosophy at the University of California whose research interests include "our poor knowledge of our own conscious experience, the nature of belief, and the role of reflection in moral psychology." Using a simple "beeper" experiment with his students, Schwitzgebel pursues the "promise and the problems of sampling conscious experience" in a paper titled *Do You Have Constant Tactile Experience of Your Feet in Your Shoes? Or Is Experience Limited to What's in Attention?*¹ In asking this question, Schwitzgebel reveals that the quality of our conscious awareness moment by moment may reflect things about us that we never suspected to be the case.

For instance, when not attending to your feet in your shoes, or the hum of traffic in the background, do such experiences drop out of consciousness? When thinking about some unpleasant interaction as we drive, do we arrive at our destination and "wake up" with no explicit memory of having driven there? Is it possible to have no conscious experience of the road as we

drive to work, or is it a case of intermittent conscious experience? Is consciousness nothing more than "experience" by another name? Could it be that behavioral responses as we drive while thinking about something else are merely automatic adjustments similar to those we exhibit when leaning against a hard object? Are we then in some intrinsic sense both conscious and unconscious simultaneously? Are we "blind", "deaf" or "dumb" to some stimuli while being attentive to, and aware of, others? These are just some of the questions raised by Schwitzgebel, and they are good questions in that they drive us into ourselves in an unexpected manner.

In what sounds like a tone of resignation, Schwitzgebel informs us that he has largely devoted his career to criticizing introspection as a means to answer such questions, but that he has had to lump for a "more empirically controlled means of addressing this question introspectively." This is the only way the different theories concerning consciousness can, in his opinion, be resolved. So he gives his students beepers to wear during their normal daily routine, and these beepers "go off at long intervals when participants are likely to be immersed in other things." The beauty of such an experiment is the element of surprise. The participant is "objectively" primed for the experiment, but reacts "subjectively" when the beeper goes off. This means that he/she reacts "authentically" because of the element of surprise. Yet Schwitzgebel has qualms about his experiment; he knows it isn't perfect. There's a chance of salvaging something that legitimately "casts at least some initial light on the phenomena and starts to expose the theoretical and empirical possibilities," but there is also the chance of the student's mentally interfering with the experience even as it is taking place.

A complex array of data follows, plus the often surprised reactions of students who expected one result, but got another. Most students reported becoming absorbed in their own activities to such an extent that they completely forgot about the beeper until it went off. Submerged in conscious activity, they were surprised to remember that they had forgotten all about the experiment they were engaged in.

In his final analysis Schwitzgebel is hopeful, but careful in his summation of what is actually going on in such moments. If a participant got it right in the first few seconds after the beep, then it was unlikely they would

misreport later – everything depended on that tiny window of opportunity. Information of a reliable nature was available, but it depended on those involved "waking up" to the fact that they had, for an instant, "woken up" *out of* some other condition of mind. Schwitzgebel reads this "instant" as potentially objective rather than subjective because of the manner in which it has arisen, and explains why he thinks this to be the case.

A beeper is appealing because it has a sharp onset, targeting a single, specific moment of experience, and because participants can be told in advance what to reflect on in the targeted experience. No seconds-consuming verbal query is necessary. One can combine the advantages of surprise and preparedness.²

An important point to recognize is that falling into conscious engagement is never ever recognized as having happened in the instant that it happens, but that it can be detected as we emerge from conscious engagement. Can, but seldom is recognised due to our falling almost immediately back into some other form of conscious engagement. The possibility of glimpsing this is always there, only occasionally perceived, but hardly ever understood as to its importance. Schwitzgebel does not mention this anomaly; he is concerned with other factors.

Our tendency to topple again and again back into conscious engagement is to miss out on what might be termed *the arising of a moment of existential freedom*. In the tiny gap between not being aware of tactile sensations, and becoming aware of them, we are not only confronted with previously unregistered physical phenomena, we are also presented with the opportunity to expand that experience into an appreciation of ourselves as a living being. This is such a subtle point it can be easily missed, and just as easily dismissed as illusory, but it does in fact harbour a powerful realisation: we are seldom *fully* sentient, and only become so *as we awaken* to the fact of our being almost continuously submerged in thinking and doing. In religious terms this awakening of the self to the self could be described as a form of *resurrection*.

Lucid Dreaming

Keeping all of this in mind as best we can, we must now turn to the research of Celia Green into "lucid dreaming", a condition described as "lucid" not because such dreams have unusual visual clarity, but because the dreamer is "aware, at the time, that he/she is dreaming."³ As Director of an Institute of Psychophysical Research, Green raised an eyebrow or two in the '60s with her ground-breaking work on individuals who claimed the ability to "consciously reflect" while dreaming, a claim that flatly contradicts everything we think and know about sleep and dream. But more than that, even, for in the final chapters of this seminal work she refers to the writings of the Russian mathematician P.D.Ouspensky, and Ouspensky had been a lifelong student of the controversial Armenian philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff. Gurdjieff is not mentioned in Green's text, but he is there by proxy in that it is his ideas about consciousness and awareness that underpin key research factors in transpersonal psychology.

There are dream states within which a sleeper can be simultaneously conscious although caught up in the machinations of a dream. That this can happen is now attested to by other researchers. What interests me is the correspondence between "waking up" out of "conscious engagement" as described by Schwitzgebel, and the parallel experience of "waking up" within a dream. There is a tantalising similarity between these states, and it may well be that they're connected in some way.

Ouspensky's contribution to this subject was his claim that he could enter the lucid dream state without going through the normal transition of entering the sleep state; he had mastered the art of holding his conscious awareness in place as his body fell asleep. Celia Green remarks that this capacity is different from that reported by other lucid dream travellers, and throughout her book refers again and again to Ouspensky's often highly original observations. In Ouspensky's view, for instance, dreams were not the result of physical sensations, or memories formed while awake. He rejected psychoanalytical methods of dream interpretation, preferring to think that dreams were generated out of dream images through subtle acts of conscious association and woven into a tapestry of elaborate and coherent plots. So speedily did we do this that the instants of change in our dreams seemed to be of their own making, whereas they were more

probably constructed out of subtle clues subliminally registered.

In connection with this, an interview with Professor Charles Tart of the University of California is of particular interest. Conducted by the journalist Jayne Gackenbach, this well-known figure in transpersonal psychology is asked how he came to write a book dealing with the phenomenon of lucid dreaming, a book called *Waking Up*. After some introductory remarks about reality being perceived by some spiritual traditions as similar to that of the dream state, Tart's researches are revealed to be based on the work of both P.D. Ouspensky and G.I. Gurdjieff, and with this established, Gackenbach homes in on a technique developed by Gurdjieff to help his students wake up out of submerged conscious engagement.

Gackenbach: As I understand the Ouspensky-Gurdjieff material ... there's essentially an asking of a critical question, a self-reflectiveness, an attempt, purposely, to reflect on what you're saying and doing as much as possible through the day.

Tart: It's not usually expressed as a question, but if you did, it would be asking yourself something like, "What am I doing right now, what am I perceiving right now, what's my state right now? You could do it that way, but it's usually not done in such a verbal formation.

Gackenbach: How is it usually done?^[1]_[SEP]

Tart: It's an immediate shift of attention to being conscious of the normally unconscious. Once you do it, you realise that our ordinary state is that we're "lost". We don't know what's going on much of the time. We're just as passive in ordinary life as we are in dreams. Events happen and our mental processes react. Buttons get pushed, to use that wonderful old '60s language, and our conditioned responses occur. A set of mental scenarios begin. Normally you're just running on automatic with these things all the time. Becoming self-reflective, you consciously see yourself doing these. As you pay enhanced attention more and more, you begin to get an option to be present to your experience more continuously, and to both have more control and be more open to new experiences.

There are a number of ways to observe yourself. Some ways are biased or have built-in preferences. For example, lots of people observe themselves from their superego. Your superego has a listing of what is good and bad. It watches you and gives you a shot of anxiety when it thinks you are doing something bad. That's not what I'm talking about. In the first place, superego witnessing is automated. In the second place it's not yours, it was conditioned into you by outside forces – society, your parents and so forth.

Gackenbach: So the "effort" aspect is not there?

Tart: There is an effort, but it is a small effort. It's not much ... The effort is to remember to do it, because what you discover is that you are constantly swept away by phenomena.⁴

There is, in essence, no difference here between the experiment set up by Eric Schwitzgebel and that of the waking-up technique proposed by Charles Tart. And as suggested earlier, there is a parallel between waking up consciously inside a dream structure and that of waking up inside the cascading phenomena of our daily lives. There is a sense in which life *is* a dream, not in the sense of life being no more than a dream, but in the sense of our living it *in a state not dissimilar to that of dream*. For Tart this is the meaning of "samsara" or "maya" in the Eastern tradition. It is not that the world is unreal; it is that *we* are mostly unreal. Submerged in thought and deed we are at the mercy of every passing event whether good or bad.

There are in fact three distinct levels of waking up available to us, and each constitutes an escape from a submerged state of consciousness. The first is from out of ordinary sleep, the second from within the dream state after falling asleep, and the third from what appears to be a fully conscious state, but isn't. The most obvious "waking up" is from sleep; the difference between being asleep and being awake is stark. Even more stark is the sensation of becoming conscious *during* a dream; to wake up inside a dream is to be confronted with a distinct sense of one's normally awake self while engaged with the often bizarre scenarios dreams afford. To wake up while apparently fully awake is however just as bizarre, for the shift in perception is so subtle and of such short duration it can easily be missed.

This tells us that our normal, everyday awake consciousness may not be as normal as we think; it may in fact harbour another superior level of awareness that can be cultivated.

The Inner and the Outer

A conundrum of consciousness detected by the philosopher Jacob Needleman is the assumption that "thinking" and "emotion" constitute our *inner life*. He flatly rejects this idea, and says in response: "The inner and outer world have been misunderstood, and this misunderstanding has had disastrous consequences both for Christianity and modern culture". The world of "thoughts" and "emotions" constitute not our inner world, but the outer world in the sense that they are predominantly about the outer world.⁵ Our thinking, if we think about it at all, is mostly about external things, our emotions reactions to external things, our dreams composed of external images. We have turned ourselves outside in and failed to detect not only this anomaly, but compounded the problem by perceiving feeling as no different from emotion and slamming shut the door to our senses.

Our emotions are, as we know only too well, unreliable as guides in terms of how we perceive reality, the thinking that attends emotional evaluations similarly tainted and untrustworthy. But we have perhaps gone too far in our search for clinical distance. Something got lost as we became more and more cerebral in attitude, and that something is our ability to sensitively evaluate reality from the standpoint of the body's deeper sensations, not merely from the ramparts of our isolated and lonely intellects. We have to wake up to what is going on in our lives and intellectually tease "feeling" and "emotion" apart until their complex interactive nature becomes obvious. In dictionary terms this is not difficult to do. Emotion is defined in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* as agitation of mind, feeling, an excited mental state; whereas feelings are extended to include sense of touch, physical sensation, emotion (often hope, fear, etc), sympathies, readiness to feel, tenderness to others, suffering, and, lastly, *conviction not based solely on reason*. (author's italics) Not until the very end of this definition do we stumble into a clearly stated *negative*, that being the notion that feeling is untrustworthy in relation to reasoned propositions. All other parts of the definition lend themselves to positive outcomes in relation to the body and our relationships with others.

Emotion, on the other hand, stands condemned immediately as unreliable because an overly agitated and excited mind tends towards irrationality.

That emotion splices into feeling and feeling into emotion is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the assumption that this splicing effect is identical from both directions and that whatever the pull the demands of reason are in jeopardy. It is so clearly the case that feelings, at their best, are evaluative at base and not stupidly reactive that one has to wonder why this has been overlooked. There is an emotional element in feeling evaluations, but not in the sense of haywire constructs. One may, for instance, be excited by an idea arrived at after effort, but that does not mean one is somehow out of mental control. Emotion in the service of evaluative feeling is a positive, not a negative. Reactive emotions are quite different; they tend towards a disruption of reason because they are sudden, and often explosive. In this sense our subjectivity has two distinct poles, one negative, one positive, the quality of our introspection being governed by which pole happens to be operative.

In his introductory essay to *Man and His Symbols*, Carl Jung differentiates between "feeling" and "thinking" in much the same manner as I've differentiated "feeling" from "emotion". Jung refers to feeling as "a judgment of value", and in this sense it is not an emotion because a judgment of value is not involuntary, it is not "reactive" in the sense that emotions can be reactive: it is an ordering function much the same as ordered thinking.⁶ So what happens when we "wake up" to this and to the fact that our inner lives are composed almost entirely of external images, people, arguments, ambitions, hopes and desires? What happens when we realise that our emotions are mostly reactions to external stimuli and little else? I can answer only for myself: It is one helluva shock. You immediately begin to re-evaluate what having an "inner life" means, and that leads one into considering what the word "spiritual" might really mean, and that carries one quickly towards the realization that Christianity's grocery list of beliefs about Jesus, God and much else, is sadly lacking in *interiority*. The inner life of the body, us *as* body is, as a result, hardly ever listened to because its voice has become indistinct; it has become a mere whisper, a distant murmur drowned out by emotional outbursts and sterile intellectual wranglings devoid of a feeling-evaluative base.⁷ Enter Father

Sylvan, Jacob Needleman's spiritual mentor, with this Gurdjieff-based observation:

When you have lost something, you must look for it exactly where you have lost it. Study, observe, watch; where, exactly, do you lose being and consciousness? In what do you lose yourself? You will not discover this by speaking the old language or by cultivating the old attitudes of religious piety or morality. You will not find Christ by going to Christ, but only through seeing, clearly and with precision, how you crucify Him. Only then will *you* appear.⁸

(see my essay "The Enigmatic Father Sylvan" for further information on these issues)

References:

- 1) *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, Vol 14, No. 3, March 2007.
- 2) Ibid, p 14.
- 3) *Lucid Dreams* by Celia Green, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1968. p 7.
- 4) Needleman, Jacob, *Lost Christianity*, Element Books, Wiltshire, England, 1990, p 217. Needleman's ongoing observation here that our inner life is composed mostly of outer events and happenings perhaps explains psychology's tentative conclusion that the self is little more than bundles of experience laid end to end. But is this altogether true? Is this not to ignore the unconscious level where experience is of a quite different calibre, where "bodying" is a vital part of comprehension through evaluative feeling?
- 5) Jung, Carl, *Man and His Symbols*, Picador, 1978, p. 49.
- 6) Ibid, p 213. This anomaly is also noted by David Pole in *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, University of London, The Athlone Press, 1958, p. 66.
- 7) Feeling theorists go wrong in excluding cognitive processes from the ontology of emotion. Emotions include judgements about the world, and much else, we are told. Feelings can be thought of as "having intentionality when we see them registering representations of danger or offence." In this sense feeling "involves appraising or evaluating the object of our emotion." See *Journal of Consciousness Studies* Vol 16, No.4, 2009, pp 5-19.
- 8) Sylvan, Father, *Lost Christianity* by Jacob Needleman, (as above)p 213.