

TIME, TIMELESSNESS & THE UNGRASPABLE SELF

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THE ENIGMA OF TIME AND TIMELESSNESS, OR NON-TIME, IN
RELATION TO OUR ONGOING SENSE OF SELF AND ITS ORIGIN
IN EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

The contention of this paper is that timelessness, as a claimed experience, could exist hypothetically within time itself as an alternative dimension of time. Time is here defined as either an experience in relation to sensed duration, or as a deduced abstraction, timelessness as an experience or intellectual intuition in relation to subtle shifts in perception within which time is either sensed as nonexistent, or within which there is a sensed change in the character of time. Timelessness is then not merely the antitheses of time - that may be a misnomer in relation to the limitations of language, or to a limited use of language. Timelessness is perhaps a depth perception of time's passing housing anomalies of registration and experience quite beyond rational categories, but not beyond imaginative, creative registration. Timelessness may not exist at all, so-called experiences of timelessness indicate states of consciousness in relation to multiple space-time dimensions housed within one another like Russian dolls.

Time and the Perception of Time

The general definition of time is that it is an adduced abstraction in relation to conscious existence over and against three-dimensional space: hence the notion of 'space-time' in physics and philosophy. Space and time are inseparable, and in

being inseparable they constitute a form of knowing in that orientation and progression in space is to intuit time's passing in relation to physical and psychological events. Orientation in space is perceptual judgment in the Kantian sense of experience functioning as a primary state of awareness *within* consensually defined time.¹ Or, as Shanon puts it, "{E}verything psychological takes time". All cognitive behaviour is grounded in time by definition, there being "no difference between external and internal behaviours."² Quoting Natorp, Hans-Georg Gadamer says "Consciousness is not given as an event in time, but time as a form of consciousness."³ Experience in terms of immediacy is an undifferentiated unity beyond conscious cognition, perception that from out of which knowing and sense of time emerge. In their primary givenness such behaviours do not constitute conscious knowing, but they do constitute the *sensation* of knowing that accompanies knowing, and that may constitute a deeper registration of what it means to know something. So the principle question is this: Is the accompanying sensation of knowing that one knows something meaningful in itself? Is the sensation of 'knowing' an experience *prior* to consciously knowing what is known, or is it the *result* of knowing something consciously? If the latter, then we are governed by sign and symbol, if the former, then we harbour a little understood capacity for comprehension in our nontemporal depths.

Meaning as an Embodied Experience

On the basis of recent advances in psychology, affective self-givenness as immediacy is now being perceived as potentially accompanying substantive thought as a *capacity* for meaningfulness over and above any meanings that might consciously arise. Which is to recognise meaning as an *embodied* experience before it is anything else, and in being such nontemporal as well as temporal in form. Experiential

immediacy as "sensibility" is then integral to durational consciousness, nontime being a functional aspect of the human in relation to durational time. According to Zlatev (2008) there is awareness of the here-and-now, and awareness *detachment* from the here-and-now. Awareness of the here-and-now is primary; it is phylogenetic and ontogenetic. But it is also "logical" in that it can be said to support language and higher-order consciousness. Awareness of the here-and-now is for Zlatev the *core* of consciousness and the precondition for language. He considers this *a not especially controversial view*. He tells us that if it were not so "the foundational role of consciousness would not run very deep."⁴

In association with the researches of fellow linguist Esa Itkonen, Zlatev defines himself as a strong advocate of consciousness-over-language in that he perceives reflective consciousness to be necessary for the existence of language. This is so because reflective consciousness not only perceives, acts or feels, but because it has the ability to pass judgments. Language dependence on consciousness can in fact be detected during language learning in that language learning presupposes reflective consciousness. And so Zlatev concludes that "language cannot have a strong effect on the "basic layers" of consciousness, including sentience, reflection and the formation of a self-concept, but may very well have such a role when it comes to the "higher levels" involving self-regulation, reasoning and the formation of a self-concept."⁵ This tells us that "there is already self-awareness in the reflective consciousness that precedes language", although this "can probably be resolved by adopting a 'layered model' of selfhood ... where a *bodily* 'sense of self precedes and co-exists with a verbal sense of self': there are different layers of self-awareness, and the one based on language is an elaboration of pre-linguistic self-awareness."⁶ (my italics) Linguistic analysis alone is for Zlatev insufficient for dissolving or resolving philosophical problems given that it conveniently ignores

affective experience and the preverbal formation of the self.

In terms of this paper's general drift, Zlatev's approach is helpful, but it is Bresnick and Levin who pull the problem of primary and secondary processes into sharp focus. Their research (2006) suggests that it is "[The] surrounding or interwoven consciousness between and within more definable cognitions ... [that] imbues ... cognition with a sense of meaning". By such means is meaning provided to "otherwise empty set[s] of images, words, and grammar."⁷

In a paper dealing with the nature of phenomenal consciousness, Nicholas Humphrey's similarly perceives cartoons as not intrinsically funny. If they were, then in his opinion the pages of the New Yorker would be enjoying jokes all by themselves. Which is to say, in apparent alignment with Bresnick and Levin, that cartoons are empty of meaning until we affectively sense them into a state of meaningful funniness. These are of course radical suggestions. Bresnick and Levin are telling us that affective self-givenness imbues cognition of singular or collective meanings with *sense* of meaning, that our capacity for comprehension is necessarily different from that of logically extrapolated and combined forms. Signs and symbols, powerful as they undoubtedly are, are fundamentally empty of meaning in that repetition reveals them to be so: they turn into gibberish.

This observation can also be applied to cartoons. Meaning is in the first instance "sensed" rather than consciously "known", affective sensibility being an ancient form of knowing-registration exhibiting differing impulses and intensities now evolved and integrated with mind. Tellingly, the mechanical act of repeating words *drains* words of the meanings we *already* know them to possess; the resuscitation of meaning requires a refocusing of affective sensibility to complete the transaction. Affective sensibility in relation to "attention" is, in some sense not yet understood, a *gathering together of the self* that allows sense of meaningfulness to meaningfully form and register.

Meaningfulness is then not the same as meaning or meanings cognised; it is an integrated, embodied state of mind that adds *being* to the transaction.

But there are two sides to this question, two ways in which to perceive how the core self works itself into each transaction with self, other or world. Zlatev allows for language, in terms of here-and-now *detachment*, having a strong effect on higher levels of self-regulation, reasoning and the formation of a self-concept. If excursions into this linguistically detached domain seriously lack *core* sensibility, however, then what comes out may well be a detachment too far. Bresnick and Levin make language formation, whatever its level of sophistication, dependent on core sensibility at all time, but as we all know from experience, the possibility of intellectual detachment rendering thought cold and lifeless is an ever-present danger however well-intentioned a line of thought might be. There is, in a fundamental sense, not only a requirement for meanings to be rendered experientially meaningful, there is also the requirement of imbuing collective meanings with something profoundly personal. Meaningfulness, in this deeply psychological sense, is *not* simply the word "meaning" grammatical extended; it is, I would contend, the *core* condition of psyche that we lose sight of at our peril.

Ordinary and Non-ordinary states of Mind

Which brings me to psychologist and philosopher Benny Shanon, whose research in the phenomenology of human consciousness and the philosophy of psychology has marked him out as a frontier thinker. Working in the domains of psycholinguistics, the semantics and pragmatics of natural language, and with thought processes and creativity, Shanon offers "a new perspective for cognitive psychology as a science and a re-appraisal of its aims and the intellectual challenge it presents."⁸ For our purposes it is his paper 'A Psychological

Theory of Consciousness' that is of interest, for in it he 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 Cons¹, Cons², and Cons³. As "sensed being" (Cons¹) 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: Cons¹ is there during all of our lives and constitutes the foundation for a next higher stage.⁹ This next stage is of course Cons², or "mental awareness", and it is composed of "subjective experiences that are distinct and differentiated."¹⁰ 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.¹¹ This is followed by Cons³, or "meta-mentations", a level of mind where objects of attention are subjected to 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), 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) 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.¹² 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 "sciuousness" 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 mental 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".¹³ 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 (Cons¹, ² & ³) may co-exist and which displays a constant flux between them."¹⁴ Why should this be the case? Because just as Con³ is dependent on Cons² for its extended functioning, so also must Cons³ and Cons² be dependent on Cons¹ 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.¹⁵ Consciousness is then a system of dynamic alternatives, not a fixed, static hierarchy with abstract meanings isolated in its upper, conscious reaches as allowed for by Zlatev.

Shanon 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.¹⁶ He has however changed his mind on this issue. 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 physicalist approach to mental functioning and adds two extra levels to his theoretical system: Cons⁴, where mentations are experienced as being generated by something other than one's own mind, and Cons⁵ where states of mind lacking an object of attention (non-dual states of consciousness) can be "linked with mystical experiences and with distinctions made in the literature on mysticism."¹⁷ 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, Cons⁵ experiences had as a result of psychoactive influence often mirror visions described in classical mystical literature.¹⁸

Shanon's analysis of experiences had at Cons⁴ and Cons⁵ is thorough and extensive, but at this point I'm much more interested in his observation that Cons⁵ seems to correspond to Cons¹ in that both could be conceived as undifferentiated, elemental experiential states at opposite ends of an integrated system. Yet they are not actually the same thing, he now argues. 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 Cons⁴ and Cons⁵. So what is the actual difference between the two states? Well, it's basically this: As Cons² is a clinically observable progression built on Cons¹, Cons³ a progression built on Cons², and Cons⁴ a progression on Cons³ in terms of reflection, then by definition Cons⁵ should be a progression from Cons⁴ and not a retrogression back to Cons¹. As with the Bresnick/Levin Study, core, undifferentiated sensibility, is *always* present, but not as a defining state. Cons⁵ would then not be a return to an undifferentiated, primary 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 Cons⁴ and Cons⁵, for it is there on the hinge between those states that real creativity (cognitive revelation?) sets in as observed by others, and where non-ordinary phenomenological patterns such as visions, geometrical formations and mystical encounters erupt. And so, in alignment with the Japanese philosopher Tetsuaki Kotoh, Shanon asks if the entire reality of our being can be grasped from the level of language.¹⁹ For Shanon, as for Zlatev, the answer to this question is No; the problem of language is complex and requires a study of consciousness that is genuinely psychological. For Kotoh, tellingly, it was a process in which the normal relationship between language and reality broke down into a profound silence.²⁰

Despite Chalmers' imaginative efforts in 1996 to answer the "hard question" about consciousness that he himself had posed, language has not yet been shown to have a phenomenal dimension or efflorescent halo of its own: language remains a conduit for meaning, but it has not yet been shown to be a *repository for meaning*. A carrier of dormant meanings awaiting sensory investment, yes, but in themselves dead and lifeless until touched by a living affectivity. An underlying *thickness* of *sensation* is necessary for meaning to arise, meaningfulness

being a condition of psyche rather than an event in the mind. It is as if we have to limber up to embrace meaning, arrive at a state of deeply focused affective attention before the signs and symbols we use for communication can light up internally. Some form of personal investment in those meanings is required for those meanings to become meaningful, experience teaching us that reading something meaningful does not automatically result in cognised meaning: without *directed* attention meanings do not unfold. There has to be a subjective *gathering* of the self, an *investing* of the passage or thought in question with something of ourselves before anything meaningful can emerge. We do not experience meaning in some disembodied, utilitarian sense; we experience it within the context of our own private, somatically-based experiential psychologies. This is of course to go against the accepted wisdom on such matters, but as I hope to show, the accepted wisdom often lacks what could be termed Bergsonian scrupulousness.

Anomalous Experience at Depth

Knowing ourselves to know something is, it seems, embedded in *affective* sensibility, *not* in combinatory thought alone: combinatory thought is secondary to sensibility. Without primary acts of affectively rich cognition there is no 'knowing' as such, knowing divorced from self-givenness being a robotic state of mind lacking a phenomenal dimension. Or, as in the case of humans, an often phenomenally *depleted* dimension of experience. To what extent we can function in such a depleted (detached?) state of mind is a question of some importance, affective self-givenness being more than the registration of biological rumblings and grumbings, or that of algorithms mindlessly chattering neuronally among themselves. Self-givenness, it seems, is not an illusion; it is that which constitutes our underlying notion of being a self among other selves; it is a

beingness or *lack of beingness* among beings as they, we, interact with one the other, and with world. But as my opening gambit suggests, timeless immediacy need not be in itself a time-empty, knowing-empty space. Time and timelessness may fold in and out of one another beyond the restrictions of three-dimensional space-time in the form of anomalous experiences that result in comprehension, anomalous knowing being an ability to enter the so-called non-time stream of experience as an experience in itself. Such experiences may, at some point, be ineffable and beyond objective explanation, but that does not altogether render them beyond interpretation after the event. Hence mystical texts and great poetry. A balanced and reasonably well stocked mind can always find something sensible to say about such experiences, for in the end it is sensibility, not the logic of signs and symbols, that rounds out our grasping of what we have experienced.

Anomalous experience in general reflects this factor in that its sometimes *beyond* time aspect suggests, even as the mundanity of dreams suggest, both a collapsing of what appears to be lengthy time sequences into a few seconds of actual time, plus the possibility of experiencing other dimensions of experience within which there are alternative time signatures. This latter effect is, as research shows, detectable in psychotropic experience and in meditative and contemplative experience where radical changes in perception occur. More than one time signature may be believed to be operative alongside, or inside, general time. This leads to the startling possibility of a plurality of time dimensions nestled within so-called non-time in much the same fashion as Russian dolls exist one within the other, such possibilities being detectable in even the most banal levels of experience where, say, the reading of a novel can make us oblivious to time's passing while simultaneously experiencing cleverly manipulated forms of novelistic time.

And so we are forced to ask if there is any limit to this

effect, and on the basis of that question face the possibility of there being an infinity of infinities cheek to jowl with our three-dimensional conception of reality. Our notion of "infinity" may herald not some dizzyingly impossible-to-calculate extension in relation to distance, but rather an intuition of timelessness (eternity?) in relation to time's inherently changeable arrow: time itself may be full of wormholes. As with the spaces between letters and words, between not knowing something and knowing something, so also with the spaces between so-called unconscious and conscious processes: there is, it seems, a "hole" in psyche signifying either *emptiness* as Sartre so quickly concluded, or, as I would contend, a hidden quality to psyche presently beyond the grasp of physicalist theory.

Experiential Immediacy and the Immaterial Self

According to Natorp, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, immediacy of experience is beyond conscious detection, it being too immediate to register on the conscious mind.²¹ *Something* is being experienced, but that something's abiding nature cannot be known in itself, merely inferred in relation to sequences of events and the time taken to complete those events. In this sense, and in spite of its taking place *in* time, immediacy of experience lacks detectable duration as sequence this side of space-time. As such it could be said to mirror our *ever-escaping* sense of self in that it too lacks, as Hume noted, detectable duration. This tells us something quite important about the nature of self, the nature of immediacy, and by connotation the nature of time in relation to timelessness: self may exist in the same fashion that experience exists in that it reflects immediacy as a zone *within* time better referred to as *beyond* our general notion of time. Immediacy of experience could then be described as a psychological dynamic whose beyond time aspect constitutes the self's existential core. Bergson was well aware of this core; he talks of it in terms of

"deep-seated conscious states [that] have no relation to quantity [but] are pure quality",²² and of "quantity" states in relation to a self whose consciously aware presence obscures quality states. Which suggests, in turn, that conscious awareness is in itself a *depleted* state of mind prior even to exercising its limited quantifying powers.

This leaves us with two selves, but only hypothetically. The first self is composed of *intermingled* states consciously intuited, the second of consciously objectified *separated* states.²³ If self two concentrates attention on its inner states, however, it will *see* them "melt into one another like the crystals of a snow-flake when touched for some time with the finger."²⁴ Such states are too immediate to be known in the normal, formal sense of knowing, but they are not unknown in the sense of not registering on the mind. Self two is in fact capable of *glimpsing*, as Heidegger seemed to believe, the world of self one, and in doing so inadvertently slips into that world via, say, the reading of poetry, and on occasions much more directly via reverie, creative involvement or meditation. But there is of course only one integral self, one self functioning simultaneously on differing levels of attention and focus as suggested by Shanon. But self two can functionally obscure the existence of self one to such an extent that the notion of there being a non-time, immediacy-aware core self all but loses meaning. It can even be assumed intellectually that there is no core to self-immediacy, no "internal" space: just "world" (external factors) generating an illusion of self-objectivity.

The Inadvertent Creation of an Immaterial Self

As material beings situated in space, and therefore in time, we cannot help but measure experience in material and temporal terms; as beings grounded in a *beyond* time dimension, however, we are also beings for whom the *sensation* of an underlying dimension of experience beyond time and three-

dimensional space has come to constitute our sense of a behind-the-scenes *immaterial* self. This supposed immaterial self is however not a substantial entity hidden within beyond time immediacy; it is more the sensation of experience itself *beyond* form or content registering, however dimly, on the conscious mind. For Gadamer, as for physicalist theorists today, this signalled *process* and naught else; for Bergson, whose conviction was that our inherent state of experiential immediacy prior to reflection equalled a *quality* state, and not just a *quantity* state, "process" was conceived in terms of ongoing existential *value*. This approach subtly recalibrated the question of the self's worth without suggesting the existence of a substantial self, or entity, but neither did it reduce the core self's immediacy of experience to the level of a meaningless psychic soup.

Core sensibility, which is to say states of deep affectivity prefacing conscious thought, were evaluated by Bergson in terms of psychic *wholeness*, not in terms of processes mindlessly processing. Describing "quality states" as *pure*, and therefore *primary*, Bergson defined "quantity states" as *secondary*, and by implication, *impure*. In doing so he raised the question of what "authentic" or "inauthentic" human experience and behaviour might be in itself, for by what means could process alone generate such telling differentiations? If there were no *locatable* centre to experience, no core value to its arising, then by what means had we managed to intuit "value" as a meaningful category? Was "value" no more than a "quantity" of beneficial results; or was it a further *quality* of knowing? In *Bergson: Thinking Backwards*, F. C. T. Moore deals with this question in relation to Bergson's conception of "action-schemata", such schemata being the *sensation* of being a living being over and above the building of cognitive *representations* of reality. Acceptance of this view would of course "lead to a certain reorientation of conceptual and empirical work in this area", he warns us, information

processing as the prime mover being replaced by "action-oriented devices, some at least of whose cognitive abilities are subordinate to its purpose."²⁵

Matters of Crucial Concern

An important aspect of Bergson's overall philosophy lay in his realisation that immediacy of consciousness is "nowhere so striking as in the case of our feelings." Feelings such as love or melancholy overwhelm us due to "a thousand different elements dissolv[ing] and permeat[ing] one another without any precise outlines". Nothing is externalised; hence the originality of our feelings: an originality we *distort* "as we distinguish a numerical multiplicity in their confused mass".²⁶ Feelings are ever-changing *beings*, he tells us; they allow us to "gradually ... *form a resolution*".²⁷ (my italics) not out of a numerical breaking down of our feelings into descriptions, but as a result of "durations whose moments [of aliveness] permeate each other."²⁸ Then comes a prime observation: "By separating these moments from each other, by *spreading out time in space* (my italics), we have caused this feeling to lose its life and its colour."²⁹ We are left with a "juxtaposition of lifeless states", an "impersonal residue of impressions" ready for use in some future deduction within which, incongruously, even observations such as Bergson's can be included in terms of proposition.³⁰ But to good effect, hopefully, for this curious reversal of the accepted wisdom, when recognised, when properly *sensed*, momentarily lifts the veil "which we interpose between our consciousness and ourselves",³¹ so bringing us back to the experience of our own presence. Not Martin Heidegger's utilitarian "being there" (*Dasein*), but the *presence* of our own presence whatever that might prove to mean.

The point being made here is that in proportion to how far we *detach* ourselves from this deeper level of the self, so are

we removed from our underlying aliveness and made subject to ideas rendered more and more lifeless and impersonal due to lack of self-presence. Numerical multiplicity rules the roost, so to speak, the vibrantly-immediate inner life that we bring to words annulled as words separate out into an impersonal externality and begin to generate meanings out of themselves at the combinatory level.³² Logical contiguity reigns (Bergson), the nudgings of a "living intelligence" and its subtle, contradictory blending of facts and experience all but ignored, the ongoing process of sense and sensibility swapped for the uncertainties of disembodied acts of association. Hence Bergson's concept of "quality" over "quantity", his conception of two selves, one immediate, the other constantly obscuring that immediacy for the very best of intellectual reasons. But there is of course only one experiential self, one embodied intelligence stretching experientially all the way down into the darkness of matter. A kingdom within a kingdom,³³ an inner life and an outer life where, with ever growing intellectual confidence, "succession" is *made* overpower "simultaneity".³⁴ Bergson's answer to this problem is confronting and paradoxical: if we want to get back to our *real* self, the self of our *immediacy*, our *alive* self, then we have to face up to the consciously constructed intellectual contradictions we use to avoid a deeper scrutiny of that self.³⁵

Time, Free Will and Internality

A 1960s review of Bergson's republished book *Time and Free Will* refers to the rhetorically brilliant yet analytically scrupulous nature of the text, and to the fact that it contains the germ of Bergson's entire philosophy. That is an interesting observation. Although published in French in 1889, and in English in 1910, this reviewer nevertheless considered the book's rationale relevant to the philosophical perplexities of the sixties, a time of debate over science's fundamental concepts and procedures

and the establishing of a rationale that explained the self in relation to time and freedom of will. Time and freedom of will were important factors in this debate, Bergson's early contribution considered a masterpiece of contemporary philosophy dealing with matters of crucial concern. I heartily agree. Seventy-one years had passed since the book's appearance in French, fifty since its appearance in English, yet this reviewer thought it relevant to the problems he and others were then facing, namely, the growing distinction being made between the human and natural sciences, a distinction fast turning into an unbridgeable gulf. In this context Bergson's book was memorable and liberating in that it dealt not only with the niceties of philosophy, but also with "literature and religion, ethics and metaphysics, and with the psychological, social and cultural aspects of everyday life." *Wholeness*, not "holeness" as *emptiness* had been conceived by Bergson to underlie the self's immediacy, a conception now all but replaced in philosophy and psychology by the bleak notion of our being empty existential sites. Heidegger had attempted to shore up this site with philosophically sophisticated ideas couched in a language of his own making, but when all was said and done his poetically arresting efforts were marred by linguistic opacity. It is Bergson who emerges from the gloom of an encroaching existential debacle to right the philosophical boat and reset its course, a contribution yet to be properly recognised for its no-stone-left-unturned attention to the phenomenology of human experience. Language redeemed itself in Bergson's push into our material depths; we were no longer in the presence of a juxtaposition of lifeless states where life itself had lost life and colour.

I would make much the same claim for Shanon's 2002 book *The Antipodes of the Mind*, and for his 2008 paper 'A Psychological Theory of Consciousness'. A. H. Almaas' 1984 book *The Pearl Beyond Price* is also important, his 2016 paper 'Experience, Self, and Individual Consciousness' presenting a

fully developed psychological profile of the human governed by clarity of exposition. Heidegger did not much like clarity of exposition; in his opinion it ran the danger of appearing to explain what it in fact could not explain. Clarity was for Heidegger a mischief of the intellect, a form of hubris where mind attempted to capture the vicissitudes of an untamable reality in strict propositional terms. He was not mistaken in thinking this. His mistake lay, I would contend, in concluding that only a form of philosophical poetry could tease open, or, more accurately, *appear* to tease open, the doors of perception. Ultimately, this teasing open of perception in Heidegger is to little effect; it is no more than a metaphorical misnomer for a *sense* of something inexplicable in the poetry itself. We have escaped the epistemological limitations of language by immersing ourselves in the insinuating *sound* of language. Oblique insinuation is what we are left with, not the sound of meditative silence as found in the philosophically rich ruminations of Tetsuaki Kotoh. For me, Heidegger's much-vaunted sense of "silence", his "echo of silence" (*Gelaut der Stille*) is wholly intellectual; for Kotoh, on the other hand, it seemed to reflect something of Zen experience. I think Kotoh was misled in thinking so. Cleverly articulated as Heidegger's conception of this "echo of silence" is, it remains a cerebrally cold conception that holds one ever at a distance from what this echo actually signifies. Which tells us, and tells us plainly, that Heidegger's *Gelaut der Stille* is an experiential *absence* of the presence of silence, an *unvoiced* cry of despair that systematically, almost insidiously, dismantles the experiential atemporal self's capacity to know this echo in terms of an abiding *presence*.

The Time *Inside* Time Conundrum

In *The Antipodes of the Mind*, Shanon's pioneering cognitive study of the plant-based Amazonian psychotropic brew,

Ayahuasca, a comprehensive charting of the various facets of the special state of mind induced by Ayahuasca is analysed from a cognitive psychological perspective. Being a philosopher as well as a psychologist, Shanon also presents some cogent reflections on time and timelessness as he lays the theoretical foundations for the psychological study of non-ordinary states of consciousness. And not just in intellectually removed terms: his reflections and analytical summations are grounded in extensive experiences with the brew itself, and on interviews conducted with a large number of informants: indigenous people, shamans, members of different religious sects using Ayahuasca as a sacrament, and *ad hoc* travellers. So says the back cover of this formidable study, and it leads one into what some will consider a world of hallucinations taken far too seriously. I can well understand this reaction, but I take Shanon's study seriously because it reflects many aspects of deep meditational experience while simultaneously enlarging even an experienced meditator's grasp of the territory. I will however concentrate on those aspects dealing with time signatures in particular, for it is there that we catch a glimpse of the mind's capacity to confound, and be confounded by, its formal notion of time and how it works.

Time, Shanon tell us, is fundamental to human cognition; we are constitutionally time-bound in terms of external experience in relation to world, and internally in relation to our own psychologies.³⁶ This is also true of sensory perception in terms of performance: everything psychological takes time, even altered states of consciousness within which new temporal modes are experienced.³⁷ Such modes induce mental states that defy the supposed dominion of time, one's perception of time undergoing dramatic changes in registration.³⁸ The contrast between real time and perceived time is sometimes modified to such an extent that all trace of normal, formal time, is annulled. Yet time continues to exist in that perception continues to function, albeit in a new and sometimes highly

complex fashion. Time can appear to stop, one's existence outside time be maintained in spite of this anomaly, the duration of time inside this non-time space appear extensive, even unlimited.³⁹ This apparent stopping of time is of course an extreme result of modified temporality, a modification intuited as a halting of time through a perceived change in the flow of time.⁴⁰ Which is of course a contradiction in terms, for how can any perceived modification in the flow of time be interpreted as the cessation of time? Shanon notes that in Western philosophy this is referred to as *sub specie aeternitate* - from the perspective of eternity⁴¹ - but what, one has to ask, does that mean experientially? Is eternity an intuition of infinity in that infinity is by definition *not* a measurement of distance in the same sense that eternity is *not* a measurement of time? Has space-time perhaps collapsed in on itself?

All of this could of course be the result of sensory confusion if sense of time were all that one had to deal with, but that is not the case. In relation to experiences induced by Ayahuasca, modifications in sense of time are often accompanied by alternative landscapes of experience within which interactions of some complexity take place; everyday reality is replaced *in its entirety* by an alternative reality, or an alternating gallery of realities populated by objects, animals or people. Which tells us that whatever these experiences are, they are experienced in some form of time in that they exhibit order, sequentiality, change and movement.⁴² Such experiences can be of ancient, enchanted, or futuristic civilisations, and are generally viewer-oriented in that the scenes function independently of the viewer.⁴³ It is as if one has travelled backward or forward in time, the phenomenon simultaneously involving the intersection of two distinct points in time in that one still exists physically, and to some extent mentally, in formal time.⁴⁴ Involvement in historically known scenes is however also possible, and that doubly confounds the time

element being experienced: the past can apparently be experienced *as if* in its own present, one's involvement in the scene sometimes psychologically harrowing. This also applies to futuristic scenes.

Shanon speculates that such experiences may take place in a non-temporal realm,⁴⁵ and that suggests realms of time within a non-temporal zone intimately connected to the psychology of the individual. But what does that mean? What do the words "the psychology of the individual" mean if, by definition, all we are in terms of awareness is a system of experiences reflexively doubling back on itself? If there is an atemporal realm of experience open to us under certain conditions of mind, then we are faced with a suggestion that flatly contradicts the notion that human cognition is grounded only in a fixed form of sequential time. The registration of objective, three-dimensional reality may not be our only marker in terms of gauging the nature of reality, the nature of time or the nature of the self, and that, as Shanon admits, is an intellectually unsettling idea in that it opens up the possibility of our existing simultaneously in ordinary and non-ordinary cognitive states.⁴⁶ As states of time dislocation can be achieved during meditation and even during creative reverie, then we are perhaps hovering near to an atemporal realm of experience without realising it.

Ordinary consciousness may in fact be riddled with improperly registered non-ordinary cognitive perceptions, some hallucinatory experiences belonging naturally to that realm and not necessarily to some unnatural state of mind. Psychotic states of varying severity exist, that is a given, but not all hallucinatory states need be psychotic: intense creative states may shift perception from one reality mode into other more penetrative reality modes carrying the possibility of even greater extension.

Foreground and Background Cognitive Experience

In their 2006 paper 'Phenomenal Qualities of Ayahuasca Ingestion and its relation to Fringe Consciousness and Personality', Bresnick and Levin again enter the fray and suggest that the psychoactive properties of Ayahuasca may reverse the background and foreground of cognition and provide better access to the structure of consciousness than do other phenomenological and introspective research methods.⁴⁷ In support of this contention they point to Ayahuasca's ability to initiate a state of "enhanced perception, heightened understanding of the mechanisms of thought and perception, intense visions, increased synaesthesia and alterations in spatial and temporal experiences [plus] [f]eelings of heightened immediate present [and] shifts in focal consciousness [that] are similar to other states of deep relaxation and increased subconscious awareness such as meditative, hypnotic, and hypnogogic states characterised by increased theta EEG activity." Then, as already noted, they suggest that "the surrounding or interwoven consciousness between and within more definable cognitions ... imbues that cognition with a sense of meaning," and that this sense of meaning "provides meaning to ... otherwise empty set[s] of images, words, and grammar."⁴⁸ We are, whether aware of it or not, whether willing to admit it or not, staring into the hub of what it means to be a human being in that pure perceptual awareness is the living matrix within which foreground thinking takes place, the *place of meaning*, or Bergsonian *quality*, that we sense ourselves to be. The core self is then not an immaterial entity or being in the sense of something ghostly hiding somewhere in our neuro-biology; it is, fundamentally, a *place of meaning*, a capacity for endowing meaning itself with its *aura* of meaning *beyond* rudimentary meanings in relation to language. That we do not yet understand what that might signify is, I would contend, our starting place in this now revived discussion around the self and its origins.

In this vein Bergson advocates a "vigorous effort of analysis [to] isolate the [self's] fluid inner states from their image, first refracted, then solidified in homogeneous space."⁴⁹ There is a level of the self that language [*cannot*] *get a hold of* "without arresting its mobility ... two forms of multiplicity, two forms of duration ... time as quality, in which it is produced, or in time as quantity, into which it is projected."⁵⁰ Natorp's and Gadamer's non-time immediacy has suddenly taken on a time element, a psychologically-based expression of time that only rigorous analysis can unveil. But how is such a thing possible? How can one analyse the unanalysable? How can one identify time as quality projected into time as quantity? Well, either by open-minded intellectual scrutiny via a more subtle use of language, as in Bergson, or by entering the *place* of meaning itself, a place, or space that Bergson seems to recognise when he speaks of being "brought back to our own presence."⁵¹

There is an undoubted manipulative foreground to cognitive experience, and a background of immediacy beyond conscious grasping, but under special circumstances - psychotropic ingestion in particular - these states of mind do seem to be interchangeable. As radical states of time dislocation are also experienced during deep meditative/contemplative practice, this reversing of background for foreground would seem to be an inbuilt capacity of the human mind. Artists of all types understand this to be the case, their cultivated states of dissociation a mark of their status as artists. An atemporal realm of experience exists at our psychic elbow, so to speak, a realm of creative interaction foreshadowed, but not entirely limited to, the unconscious construction of dreams. Our collective ability to dream highly complex visual scenarios may well point to an undeveloped facet of awareness. Physical determinism's conception of mind as wholly dependent on durational time for self-meaning and the creation of meanings is then a questionable premise, a premise methodically examined and exposed as inadequate by Bergson. Scientific materialism had

already undermined the notion of physical determinism having a psychological dimension in Bergson's time, and it is that notion, now entrenched, that informs and guides the debate as to the self's underlying nature .⁵²

On Being Able to Be

The feeling of being a particular kind of organism, or agent is, as Shanon observes, sometimes present over and above the feeling of having sensory experiences;⁵³ it's just that we are not cognitively familiar with the subtle difference between these overlapping states. Some kind of effort is required to lift us out of the one and into the other beyond chance encounter, an effort dependent on our waking up out of constantly engaged thinking and doing to the extent that we recognise what is taking place and act on it. But we have to recognise what is taking place. 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 *hereness*, or in our *return from herelessness*, then we will fail to understand the question of being that Being poses. This question transcends mind and body yet reveals itself through mind and body, Heidegger's phrase "the call of conscience" perhaps signifying the feeling of existential unease, or anxiety, most of us attempt to ignore throughout our lives. The feeling of being a particular kind of organism, or agent, sometimes present over and above the feeling of having sensory experiences is perhaps the *beckoning* of Being intellectually intuited by Heidegger in each engagement-laden moment. We are sometimes brought back (called?) to our own presence and made realise that to be

conscious *as* is not the same as being conscious *of*. In Bergsonian terms this is to get back to "the real and concrete self and [momentarily] give up its symbolical substitute" in exchange for the realisation that "even physical determinism, involves a psychological hypothesis".⁵⁴ There is a self "whose activities cannot be compared to that of any other force",⁵⁵ a self whose essential nature is a *self-knowing* transparency.

As I think I've made clear, I am not arguing for a substantive self in the sense of some hidden ghostly entity existing independent of body and world; I am suggesting that being in the world generates somewhat more than a self-objectifying capacity of mind mistaken for a substantive self backed by a sense of experiential immediacy. There is a level of cognitive awareness beyond thought and reflective thought, an *asness* that certain types of questions and experiences cause to stir, a sense of existence in relation to "presence", "hereness" and "attention" that heralds the approach of something deeply disconcerting, namely, a sense of self, other or world misinterpreted as biological/neuronal white noise. Selfconsciousness in this basic, utilitarian sense certainly constitutes part of the self's momentary experience, but selfconsciousness is not always selfconsciousness in this pedestrian sense. Such moments could be instances of, say, Schleiermacher's *consummate* self-consciousness, or even an experience of Husserl's "egoless" state. For when dealing with people we do not, on the whole, perceive ourselves to be speaking to self-reflecting linguistic mirrors, or empty existential sites. We do not leave their presence without excusing ourselves for that very reason. We are in the presence of a presence and become, inadvertently, a presence to ourselves whether we like the experience or not. And we may not like the experience; it may threaten us in some difficult-to-define sense beyond selfconscious unease. Or we may find ourselves in the presence of a person who functions like an empty existential site, or find ourselves functioning in a similar manner; that is, as an

alienated being. Or, more precisely, as a being alienated from *sense* of Being. There are degrees of self-awareness, degrees of response, degrees of *hereness* to self or other, and such moments can, on occasions, blossom out into unexpected experiences of *nearness*, moments of intimacy where self, other and world seem to coalesce. In such instances lie a vital clue as to our capacity for truth, and much else, instances where time, in a Bergsonian sense, registers as *quality*, and not just as *quantity*. So the question must be: What is the nature of this being for whom "hereness" or "herelessness" constitutes presence, or lack of presence? What, in effect, *is* presence?

The Self's Experiential Darkness

In 'Experience, Self and Individual Consciousness', the therapist and teacher A. H. Almaas contends that the notion of an illusory self does not fully account for the phenomenological givens experienced by that self; there is, he suspects, something profound going on in human experience that requires further elucidation: a "something" that cancels out as "elements in the phenomenology of experience" that appear to be irreducible.⁵⁶ If such elements are irreducible, then what does that imply about the self and its experiences? What kind of self could account for them, and if not a self, then how can these irreducible elements be explained?

Whatever the origin of the self might be, the illusion of being a self among selves is now consistent across the spectrum of human experience: experiences now belong to "individuals", and these individuals *know* that to be the case *from* experience. And to complicate matters further, there are not only experiences, there is also the experience of *having* experiences, a reflective recognition of experience *as* an experience in its own right, a *sense* of the experiential over and above experiences allied to the *stream* of experience. A stream of experience exists for each individual, and it belongs to no other

except by way of comparison. We share experiences, but we do not confuse ownership. More importantly, this stream constitutes who and what we are, its past, present and future aspects functioning as a personally named continuity or unity of experience with which we associate ethical, moral, intellectual and existential choices. We are, in other words, a "presence" *to* ourselves beyond the vicissitudes of our personal history, and in being a presence to ourselves are experienced *as* a presence by others. And so the question of what presence is in itself confronts us, and in being confronted by the question of Being we are drawn deeper still into the self's experiential darkness.

In disciplined, meditational terms, "hereness" verges on, and sometimes topples over into, an experience of timeless immediacy. In terms of the latter, the stream of experience ceases to have past, present or future intervals and collapses into a Now without parts. Such a state is hard to imagine and fundamentally unimaginable to those who have not had the experience: it is however a well-attested to experience throughout the history of the human species. Intellect can theoretically appreciate such a notion, but only firsthand experience informs as to its extraordinary nature. The difference between these positions is enormous: an experiencer is intercepted *by* such an experience, the intellect forced to *do* the intercepting *through* intellectual force. The experiencer experiences an *actual* self-state; the intellect, at best, a phantom *approximation* of that self-state. The experiencer experiences an *embodied* experience in terms of affective quality; the quantifying intellect a virtually *disembodied*, abstracted state. But not all that different in that they each end up housed within the limitations of language where the idea of "timelessness" presents as problematical. For how can there be such a thing as timelessness given that it has no calculable *thingness*? As a postulate, time is at least provable on the basis of calculable lived experience, whereas timelessness, as a negation or absence of time, is thought to lack experiential intervals

(cognitive sequentially) and be beyond any conceivable notion of proof. Hence hardline determinist rejection of so-called "spiritual" experiences where timelessness figures as an experience; such experiences are conceived as no more than episodes of mental disorientation leading either to hallucinatory states or mental stasis. Which is of course the case in severe psychosis, but not always the case; change the time-signature at depth as, say, in meditation or intense creative endeavour, and the claimed cancellation of time may well herald not a psychotic state, but rather Shanon's atemporal realm of experience in operation.

Philosophical speculation about such matters is permissible in terms of the self's experiential immediacy being conceived as a stream of experience that extends backwards in time, and forwards in time as a durationless Now. This conception of beingness lacks an experiential dimension, however, and that falls short of Almaas' claim in relation to the unaccounted for phenomenological givens of the self that the self does seem to experience. In Almaas' scheme the full realisation of self immediacy is experienced *as* a durationless Now that "shifts the sense of being a person from ego to Being",⁵⁷ an experience that "exposes the deep supports for the individual ego structure" assumed by the ego-self to be "inseparable from [an individual's] personal life and history."⁵⁸ We are inherently a durationless Now, and that adds up to our existing not only in the three-dimensional reality we *thinkingly* inhabit, but also in a multi-dimensional reality within which a personal history is not the governing factor. One's personal history is suspended and exchanged for an impersonal "witness" capable of uninvolved awareness. We are off the hook of memory and capable of experiencing the silent, empty awareness of the self's stupendously vast impersonal core.⁵⁹ But as Shanon and others have amply demonstrated, so-called "timelessness" can carry multiple time signatures, and that suggests realities within reality where, experientially, time can collapse or expand in

relation to an individual's psychological needs and capacities. Substantial selves we may not be, but the psychological tenor of our individual psyches does seem to govern experiential content in relation to strong, non-temporal, alternative reality events. Something happens to the self's generic *sense of self* during such events that ever after changes how self, other and world are perceived; there is an opening up of the senses that results in ongoing experiences of reality's ultimately unfathomable nature.

Going Beyond the Searching Fingers of Memory

The notion that we are no more than an aggregate of conscious states roused into expression by circumstances is, to say the least, an inadequate summation of the human condition. Experience, *all* experience, reflects not single-state factors such as pleasure, love, hate, melancholy or boredom, but rather myriad psychic factors subtly blended and made invisible due to experiential immediacy and the distinct psychology of each individual. We each have our own intimate psychology, and that psychology colours our psychic states with its own unique blend of interaction and expression. Add to this a capacity for reflection, and the mental picture that emerges takes on further depth and texture. The brain's molecular constitution is certainly at work in such states, but that does not make molecular activity the reason for such states. Bergson is emphatic on this point: "[W]e never shall prove by any reasoning that the psychic fact is *fatally* determined by the molecular movement. For in a movement we may find the reason of another movement, but not the reason for a conscious state."⁶⁰ (my italics)

This reminds me of the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch's use of the term "fatalistic determinism" to describe what she perceived to be systemic failures in philosophical thinking, and of Michael Polanyi's biting description of these same failures as intellectually romanticized nihilism. Murdoch

addresses this question in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992), and with a practiced eye draws our attention to a "plausible amoralistic determinism", a "relaxed acceptance ... of a deep impersonal world-rhythm which overcomes the awkward dichotomies between good and evil."⁶¹ That is an important observation; the idea of an *impersonal world-rhythm* perfectly captures the nihilistic mood now evident in the thinking of our intellectual elites.

But isn't such talk just 19th century conceptions of reality rehashed by those who won't take on board the cutting-edge findings of cognitive-neuroscience? Doesn't Almaas' notion of an illusionary self not accounting for the phenomenological givens experienced by that self not unravel in the face of neuroscientific findings? Steven Pinker certainly thinks so. In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, neuroscience holds pride of place in relation to how we have evolved as human beings. We're told that "the mind is not a homogeneous orb invested with unitary powers or across-the-board traits." It is, rather, a system of mental modules "with many parts cooperating to generate a train of thought or an organised action."⁶² Human behaviour is "an internal struggle among mental modules with different agendas and goals",⁶³ not the direct result of culture or society. Which means, apparently, that "every aspect of our mental lives depends entirely on physiological events in the tissues of the brain", and that the "information-processing activity of the brain causes the mind, or ... that it is mind."⁶⁴ Our perceptions, moods, personality and powers of reasoning can be altered by chemicals in the brain, and by electrical stimulation, our very thoughts made detectable by the new technologies of cognitive neuroscience.⁶⁵

Steven Pinker goes as far as to make personality types a "variation in a typical population tied to differences in their genes", and states categorically that flaws such as being "aimless, careless, conforming, impatient, narrow, rude, self-pitying, selfish, suspicious, uncooperative, and undependable"

are the result of gene differences and heritable traits.⁶⁶ The self, never mind the ego, is no more than a "network of brain systems"⁶⁷ that in themselves have neither sense of self nor ego. Elaborating further in a *Newsweek* article he tells us that "[M]odern neuroscience has shown that there is no user [of the brain]. 'The soul', is in fact, the information-processing activity of the brain. New imaging techniques have tied every thought and emotion to neural activity."

Referring to this article in his Introduction to *Irreducible Mind* (2010), Edward Kelly describes Pinker's claims as "statements [that] grossly exaggerate what neuroscience has actually accomplished." There is reason to think that neuroimaging techniques do not necessarily reflect what neuroscientists think they reflect. Kelly's basic question is this: "[W]hy is it that conscious experience of such-and-such types should be correlated with the patterns of brain activation. The presumption that brain activities give rise to, or in some sense are, the associated mental activities and experiences"⁶⁸ is quite unwarranted.

This takes us back to Bergson's and Almaas' analysis of the same question, and to their conclusion that human beings are not entirely reducible to matter. Almaas take this question one step further, however, for he notes that experiences are permanently fleeting in their immediacy, whereas consciousness as "self-presence" *permanently* abides.⁶⁹ Which is to say, along with Hume, that experiences are embedded in a form of time that continually slips out of attention, but that sense of self is embedded in a dimension *beyond* time that is constantly present. But what does that mean? Does "beyond time" mean outside of time altogether; or does it mean outside of our conscious notion of how time functions? There is an anomaly in all of this that has to be recognised, for when all is said and done it is, as is now being postulated, a subjective *gathering* of the self that allows meanings to take on meaning, there being no meaning in sign or symbol *prior* to that gathering. The

ongoing illusion of being an individual self is then linked to more than species survival; it is also linked to the fact that "consciousness has to express itself as individual consciousness for there to be experience."⁷⁰ That leaves us with a tricky situation: cognised experience without some level of self-consciousness cannot form. Without *sensed* subjectivity there is nothing on which, or through which, experience can register as an experience. Yet Almaas adds: "Whether this consciousness is a self or not is another question."⁷¹ But if not a self, then what? If experience is necessarily grounded in some level of self-registration, then what might self-registration be in itself? Subjective registration is obviously not wholly an illusion deduced as personally meaningful; it is an ongoing registration of the self's contribution to experience *and* "knowing" in terms of a deep affective unity.

There is, it seems, more to us than sign and symbol afloat on a sea of biological white noise! As a friend of mine once said, and I think sagely, "You can't overcome your ego until you've got one," and that, I think, sums up our situation rather well. It is the inbuilt limitations of sign and symbol that make us aware of the limitations of sign and symbol, which is to say that we can't overcome the limitations of sign and symbol until we notice how sign and symbol drive us towards an inevitable and unavoidable crisis of meaning. Inevitable as this may seem, indeed, inevitable and unavoidably true as it is, it is only so because we are mesmerised by a misplaced notion of intellectual honesty. Such is the nature of an unintended nihilism unfolding as an *impersonal world-rhythm* that inadvertently delivers up a big fat existential nothingness for all to admire. And all because we have pushed the self into being, by definition, a big fat nothing, a nothing that has discovered its own nothingness and is inordinately proud of the achievement. The "endgame" of society and civilisation is, it is believed, in sight, the last vestige of self emptied from the question of self that self poses to itself, the sheen of an ever-developing

technology and the howl of endless entertainment our collective contribution to sanity.

The question of whether this consciousness of ours is a self or not is a question Almaas tackles in a unique manner, the self's underlying core awareness being described as a beyond time support mechanism for individual ego structures.⁷² In Almaas' scheme the ego structure is individualised, or personalised, by way of the conscious self associating the self's permanently *abiding* core presence, which he terms the Personal Essence, with its conscious notion of being a fully presenced self. Herein lies the nature of the illusion experienced by the self, an illusion the ego believes to be an ever-present immaterial self, but which on inspection proves to be intermittent at best, and at worst entirely absent. Properly understood, however, self-presence is not a fleeting or intermittent experience allied to physiological processes or intuited self-immediacy; it is a *permanently* there "something", but it does not constitute the presence of the ego-self. In this sense Pinker is correct, but only partially. Self-presence actually belongs to the core-self as "Personal Essence" according to Almaas (Bergson's "quality/value" state?); it is a "stupendous vastness, an absolute silence, a complete impersonality, and a singularly clear but absolutely uninvolved awareness of everything"⁷³ that the ego-self fragments in its attempt to understand self, other and world. This is not Martin Heidegger's "echo" of silence; it is Tetsuaki Kotah's psychically-transformative silence sounding experientially in the depths of Being. The problem lies in Hume's *untrackable* self, an experiential truth become an intellectually all-encompassing negation of the self, a romanticised nihilism recognised by Polanyi that renders self-immediacy no more than a linguistic plaything and the idea of an *abiding ground of self-presence* no more than a reflexive hiccupping of the mind. There is, for Almaas, no reflexive movement in self-presence; self-presence proper is *not* perception doubling back on itself: there is no

i/eye movement in it!

As currently perceived, self-presence is the ego-self's reflexive nature casting a false, intermittent shadow of individuality back on itself via the body. In Almaas' scheme it is the registration of an inadvertently *personalised* beingness that allows, via aroused affectivity, a state of self-meaning to form prior to the registration of meanings. We are, in other words, in receipt of meanings because we are ourselves fundamentally meaningful; we are more than an egocentric space; we are also a place, or space, of meaning, an emptiness that is in itself not empty. At least that is how I interpret Almaas' prose, a prose unsullied by epistemological wrangling that evolves into a radical and fascinating deviation from both secular and spiritual notions of psychic reality. The so-called illusionary self does not, in this scheme, wholly account for the nature of the self; it is still an illusion, but it has perhaps become a necessary illusion in the process of evolving into a vital component of intellectual and spiritual development. For by what means could a subjective *gathering*, an intentional *bringing together* of sensibility become necessary for meaning to *have* meaning if the self's core affectivity were no more than the rumblings of our biology? We are not entirely reducible to matter, it seems. Something profound is going on within us and we ought better to understand that something before closing up shop on the question of what a self might be in itself.

A Brief Summary

The implications of the above observations and suggestions are, I think, of some importance in that they constitute, when correlated, a perception of reality that helps counteracts the *deep impersonal world-rhythm* identified by Iris Murdoch. This rhythm is not always readily detectable in that it functions within concepts and formulas as an unstated, non-contradictable premise, an invisible reckoning of what exists

that reduces the experience of being an alive, consciously aware being, to that of an incidental reflexivity. Technically, self-awareness is now perceived as a rebounding of sensory awareness on itself, sense of self a quirky registration of processes processing generated by the organism for purposes of survival. We have no personal meaning or significance beyond a form of thinking derived from the illusion that self-objectification in relation to world bestows on us. It's all smoke and mirrors; we are in receipt of a necessary misperception now recognised for what it is.

The difficulty in all of this is that our intellectual elites are fundamentally correct in their assessment of the human condition, but almost certainly incorrect in their assessment of their own assessment in terms of final outcomes - particularly when they follow Pinker's hardline approach. Final outcomes matter in relation to how we view ourselves and one another, and in how we handle questions to do with value, judgment and meaning. If our view of the human is wholly utilitarian, which is to say doggedly "physicalist", then our appreciation of what value, judgment and meaning mean in themselves will undoubtedly suffer as a consequence. There is however an identifiable interstices point in all of this, and it is "meaning" and what meaning potentially means in relation to our experience *of* meaning *as* individuals. Meanings do not exist in a vacuum; they exist for individuals as experiences of meaning carrying highly complex ethical and moral consequences. There is no shying away from this fact; when things go wrong for an individual they respond by way of reasoned argument laced with meanings in relation to themselves as a meaningful being. It isn't just a battle of disembodied meanings in a social context; it is a battle by individuals to remain recognised as meaningful in terms of their existing. As a result of some telling research by Bresnick and Levin, meanings are now being conceived as carrying, potentially, "meaningfulness" as an extra dimension in relation to the affective depths of the individual, a

meaningfulness that according to Almaas is expressive of something beyond the human, yet inherently human in spite of that. But how can such a thing be? How can we explain such an anomaly given that all the givens of being human have been reduced to a provable emptiness? Or is that perhaps where the mistake in assessment has occurred, the mistake of viewing this emptiness in negative terms rather than through the Bergsonian lens of quality and authenticity? By such means is Murdoch's impersonal world rhythm set in motion, its doleful effects introduced into every walk of life. But with a twist, as it turns out, for the inherent nihilism in such a rhythm is portrayed as a positive, a grand intellectual realisation with which it is churlish to quibble.

Enter Shanon with his Cons¹/Cons⁵ dichotomy where Cons⁵ (mystical or ineffable states of awareness) is shown to be a progression from Cons⁴ where mentations are experienced as generated by something other than one's own mind. Cons⁵, at its most intense, generally lacks an object of attention and is linked with mystical experiences and with distinctions made in the literature on mysticism. Cons⁵ is however not a retrogression to the Cons¹ state of primacy; the absence of interactive hooks in relation to objects does not cancel out as beyond cognisance; it is a form of awareness *beyond* both differentiated *and* undifferentiated states where other cognitive appreciations of time are known to occur. There is some confusion here; not all mystical states are objectless, and that in spite of their being experienced as non-dual, or timeless. Timelessness, as an experience, may only be a lack of cognitive hooks, that is, a way of seeing that does not require reflexivity of mind. Reverie is a simple but telling example of such seeing; we are "caught up" in our seeing, as it were, aware in an expansive, all-including manner that holds the conscious mind enthralled. Or, if your care, *stilled*. Stillness marks reverie states out as conditionally different, an all-pervading sense of silence also being present. Literally *present*. Such an experience can be

described as ineffable in that time may seem to have stopped, but it is a form of timelessness within which we may nevertheless continue to see an apparently objective world, but not in the usual bitty fashion. Reverie is an all-at-once experience, mystical perception perhaps an intense creative extension of the same experience laced with the Cons⁴ impression of something being generated *by* something *other* than one's conscious mind. Not an hallucinatory presence generated out of the imagery; more a sense of something over and above our usual sense of self that dramatically expands our appreciation of what self-presence might mean in itself.

In his concluding remarks on the effects of the psychotropic substance Ayahuasca, Shanon admits that if "commonalities in Ayahuasca experience cannot be accounted for in ordinary psychological terms, then perhaps we have to ... consider the possibility that these commonalities reflect patterns exhibited on another, extra-human realm";⁷⁴ a realm "functioning as an alternative reality not dependent on the human."⁷⁵ But not utterly separated from the human given the importance he affords the psychology of individuals. Plato had postulated the existence of "Ideas" as an independent order of reality, and that, for Shanon, opened a perceptual door where Ayahuasca experience became potentially explicable.⁷⁶ Such experiences carried unique intimations of reality that teased the conscious mind towards an imaginative reworking of reality, a reworking dependent, finally, on the individual's capacity to enter and sustain the experience of timelessness.⁷⁷ The psychological strengths or weaknesses of the individual governed experiential outcomes, not some miraculously component in Ayahuasca itself. When all was said and done it was the human element that determined how far the barrier between realities would fall, and that, for Almaas, threw us back on the question of what the self was in itself beyond it being an ego complex. Ego was certainly part of the experiential picture, but only in terms of how it behaved in the face of experiences

that threatened its apparent sequentiality in time. Something other than the conscious mind and the ego complex was at work, and that "something" in Almaas' scheme answered to his notion of a core self, an inadvertently personalised core carrying intimation of something deeper still. Shanon's "extra-human" domain is, I suspect, part of this equation, but it is a domain whose explosive experiential potentials are firmly rooted in an individual's personal psychology, a psychology capable of opening out into a realm, or realms, of self-discovery beyond personal imagining.

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