

Ours Is Not a Dead Universe

SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

WHEN WE TURN to religions and traditional civilizations all over the world, we see a remarkable unanimity in regards to consciousness. It is something that *is*, like Being itself, which at its highest level of reality is at once luminous and numinous. Universally, consciousness is regarded as not only a state or a process, but a substance. Consciousness at its elevated levels is at once knowing and knowing that it knows, knowledgeable of its own knowledge. It is at once the source of all sentience, of all experience, and beyond all experience of the knowledge that something is being experienced.

In the Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu sacred scriptures, we read, "When alone is the dawn beaming over all this, it is the one that severally becomes all this." The one is *Sat*, *Chit*, and *Ananda*, the three states of being, consciousness, and bliss. In reality it is *Chit*, consciousness, that *is* *Sat*, or being, and is also *Ananda*, or bliss. We find the same idea in the *Tao Te Ching*, the primary text of Taoism, which also influenced Neo-Confucianism. The nameless Tao is the beginning of heaven and earth, and the same Tao is the mother of the ten thousand things. So at the origin of the universe you have the Tao, which in fact is also consciousness. We all know the opening of the Book of John: "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In chapter 6 of the Book of John, Christ says, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit

and they are life." So this Word is not simply word in the ordinary sense, but it is the spirit and life; it is consciousness. Finally, in the Koran, in chapter 36, the surah *Yasin*, it is said, "But His command when He intendeth a thing is only that He sayeth unto it, be and it is." So the origin is very explicitly stated in the Koran to be the command of God, who is the knower (*al-'Alim*) and is supreme consciousness.

I believe that it was only with the Scientific Revolution that "in the beginning was consciousness" was seriously challenged. Once the new worldview was established in which God became at best only the creator of the world, two issues arose. First, all the levels of consciousness were reduced to a single level. That is, the multileveled structure of the world of consciousness—from the Divine Consciousness, to the angels, the great intellects, the great saints, and sages, all the way to the consciousness of ordinary human beings (not to speak of animals)—was reduced to a single level of reality. People began to speak of consciousness in the world as being confined to ordinary human consciousness alone.

The second consequence was even more devastating. While it is true that most of the architects of the Scientific Revolution accepted that God created the

Right: Embroidered Svetambara (Jain textile depicting a circle of jinas, great teachers who are emancipated souls)





world and that God had consciousness, they believed that after creating the world he had nothing further to do with it. In other words, they understood "in the beginning" only temporally. This is the deistic position, and during the last forty years we have been hearing about something like the same idea in new clothes—

In the Hindu view everything manifests a level of consciousness. A stone's being is a form of stony consciousness; the same holds true up the line, all the way to the level of human beings and beyond.

the Big Bang theory. It has been related to the perspective of the book of Genesis, or the Koran, and the Abrahamic vision of a creator God. But the consciousness of God within his creation is still seen as being irrelevant, because once the Big Bang has taken place, and the universe is here, there is no reference to a consciousness in the universe, and in fact the predominant scientific view denies such a reality. Only energies and material particles are spoken of, so consciousness again remains outside of God's creation.

IT IS THIS DENIAL of the primacy of consciousness that led to the method of explanation by reduction. This reductionist outlook is one of the most important characteristics of modern thought. One example is found at the doctor's office. We are reduced to what the MRI shows, and our chart, and the rest of us does not count. We are reduced to our biological aspect, and the biological aspect to chem-

Left: Throne back with the wish-fulfilling mango tree of the Jain mother goddess Ambika

istry, the chemistry to physics, and so forth. This is reductionism at work in our personal lives. It is only recently, in fact, that Harvard University has started a spirituality and healing program at the Medical School, because some medical doctors have come to realize all too well that our consciousness does affect our body in remarkable ways, even if we cannot explain it according to the prevalent scientific paradigm.

In the Hindu view (to name one example) everything manifests a level of consciousness. A stone's being is a form of stony consciousness; the same holds true up the line, all the way to the level of human beings and beyond. The consequence of cutting human consciousness off from the higher levels of consciousness in the prevalent scientific worldview is the weakening of access to the transcendent. Although the higher levels do not go away by our denying them, taking away the ladder or stairs to the third floor in this building means that one does not try to go up to the third floor any longer, and gradually the existence of the third floor is denied. Therefore, the quest for transcendence—for the empowering and illumination of our consciousness, which was the goal of all traditional civilizations—becomes irrelevant, and is ignored as an illusion. The desire for the transcendent and for the gaining of perfection, which defines what it means to be human, is horizontalized. The human search is reduced to gaining more and more information but not luminous knowledge, and this has resulted in a negative transformation of human consciousness.

This loss has put into serious doubt the truths and realities of religion itself. These truths have become either lost entirely, or reduced to meaningless metaphors or historical curiosities for modern man. It is no accident that many of the philosophies of religion from the nineteenth century onward have been based on reducing religious

realities to what can be understood temporally and materially and denying everything that cannot be demonstrated by positive historical methods or proven in a laboratory. Since we cannot walk on water, then Christ could not have walked on water either, and people who say he did were either blind or had not been as well

What does it mean to be human?

This is not just an academic matter. A Christian or Muslim would say the human being has an immortal soul, but what does "soul" mean in the generally accepted view of the cosmos? And what about our attitude toward and relation to the rest of God's creation?

educated as us, or the event had some other meaning and must, on the basis of our truncated view of reality, be interpreted metaphorically.

An important consequence of this change is the loss of the meaning of being human. What does it mean to be human? This is not just an academic matter. A Christian or Muslim would say the human being has an immortal soul, but what does "soul" mean in the generally accepted view of the cosmos? And what about our attitude toward and relation to the rest of God's creation? What does that entail? Furthermore, what is the relationship between our being human as an immortal soul and our body? Since the establishment of the mechanistic worldview there has been an indifference to the body as a source of wisdom. In the 1960s, what appeared to be a sudden rediscovery of the body, expressed through sexuality and new kinds of music, was in fact a

reaction to the reductionist view prevalent in Western society, an attempt to reassert the reality of the body.

ALL THIS BRINGS US back to what happened to us as a result of the loss of the sense of the presence of consciousness throughout reality. Not only was the sense of the sacredness of human life put into question—the word "sacred" does not mean anything in the context of modern science—but we became homeless in a cosmos that is seen as nothing but energy and matter. Historically, humanity knew its position in the universe and felt at home in it. In the West the Ptolemaic system placed the earth in the middle and all of the heavens above; this did not cause hubris because humanity was seen to dwell on the lowest level of the cosmic hierarchy. The Mesoamericans in the Amazon feel they know where they are ontologically, but we do not know where we are; we do not have a home in the cosmos, and we have lost our sense of orientation.

The result has been a very profound sense of alienation, which is one of the maladies of the modern world. Alienation, like AIDS, is really a modern ailment, and it comes, to a large extent, from the fact that if we accept this reductionist worldview that came into being in the seventeenth century, and take seriously this cutting off of consciousness from the world in which we live, then we become very lonely here. The cosmos is no longer a hospitable place for us, and we are alienated from the world in which we live. Of course, when you calculate the probabilities for our being here from a scientific point of view, and it comes out to be extremely small, then that makes it even stranger that we are here at all. That is why in our normal lives we do not take these probabilities seriously—our human psyche, in order to remain sane, has to feel somewhat at home in the world. Any person who walks in the street and smells a flower, and sees how beautiful it is, will not take this point of view seriously, because if



our human psyche is to remain sane, it must feel somewhat at home in the world in which we live.

AS THE WORLD around us becomes increasingly alien, it also becomes spiritually worthless and is valued only in so far as it gratifies our own immediate impulses and so-called needs. The result is catastrophic for the world of nature. In the early 1960s, when I was teaching at Harvard, I spent a summer doing research

Above: Altarpiece with the Jain jina Parsva preaching the universal sermon given upon attaining enlightenment (samavasarana)

on the book that became *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, first given as the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1966. These lectures foretold the environmental crisis, and spoke of its spiritual and inner causes. Practically none of the Christian theologians were interested in the issue at the time. The theology of nature was a non-existent category then. Some were angry at me for even speaking about the fact that the environmental crisis has a religious, theological, spiritual basis, and is not just a result of bad engineering. The crisis has a deep root; it has everything to do with what we think of the world around us. What is this tree that I am looking at through the window? If it is just wood for my fireplace, or if a fox is just fur to put around my wife's neck, or a mountain is just the place from which to extract iron ore and make cars, that is a very different attitude than if I look upon these things as sharing my own reality, including consciousness.

Our abominable treatment of nature is, I believe, a direct consequence of our alienation from a world in which there is no participation in a shared reality beyond the material. Even if you say, "My body is made of stardust, and I share the dust of the stars," this is a nice poetic utterance, but it does not mean anything in the prevalent scientific paradigm. Stardust is dead matter in a dead universe.

We have so much marginalized ourselves that we find ourselves at a loss when something happens that goes outside of the definition that we have determined, and either seeks or claims to find consciousness somewhere else in the cosmos. Take for example the question of UFOs or alien abductions. All civilizations have marginalized and rejected people who have had a worldview contrary to the dominant one; today we do it in the name of science. John Mack, a professor at Harvard, has studied hundreds of cases of

UFO sightings—clinically and scientifically. Even if you do not accept that these people are telling the truth, this phenomenon is related to a deep urge for connectedness with an intelligence or consciousness beyond our immediate human terrestrial sphere. This matter is not irrelevant; it is now part and parcel of our

*Within the scientific paradigm,
where is the reason for not cutting
down a tree or not killing
an animal, except sentimentality
or expediency?*

common pop culture. Children are brought up with movies about aliens and other types of science fiction.

What function does this fill? The “beings” involved in such experiences have taken the place of all the non-human intelligences and forms of consciousness that we see in traditional civilizations, in traditional philosophies as well as within folk and fairy tales. These tales were told to children by their elders, and satisfied a very deep yearning of the human soul for companionship in the world, and they were not considered mere fiction. When you cut human beings off from that cosmic world of consciousness—when it is no longer considered relevant—myth is converted to science fiction, and the vision of angels to the experience of aliens and UFOs. Myth then becomes something unreal instead of a sacred reality, and in its place have come all kinds of pseudo-myths which surround us.

DESACRALIZATION and the ensuing alienation have also made a sham of the metaphysical and philosophical basis of ethics. In all periods of human history,

ethics was related to a vision of reality, and had a cosmic aspect. We think of the battle between the good spirits, the *ahuras*, and the bad, the *divs*, in Zoroastrianism, or of St. Augustine’s treatise on the good. Whatever traditional world you enter, there is a permanent set of ethical norms that are never only human ethics linked to the human world; rather, they have a cosmic aspect. Through this depleting of the cosmos of consciousness, we have made ethical acts toward the world of nature contrived and without a metaphysical and cosmological basis. In the Ten Commandments, for example, we adhere to being respectful toward our neighbor: “Thou shalt not kill.” But within the scientific paradigm, where is the reason for not cutting down a tree or not killing an animal, except sentimentality or expediency?

In the sacred scriptures, explanations were given for an ethics encompassing the world of nature as well as that of human beings. Animals and plants were seen as God’s creation, with spiritual value, as were rivers and mountains. Those notions are now scientifically meaningless, and any environmental ethics based on that view of the world is based on mere sentimentality. What is sacred about DNA if it is just molecules banging against each other in certain configurations? If we reject the sacred, reject that it is the wisdom of God that is imprinted upon the DNA, that all creation bears the imprint of God—a meaningless statement in modern biology—where then does the sacredness of human life come from?

The withering away of traditional ethics is related to the extension of the desacralized view of nature into the domain of human life itself. This is especially notable when it comes to environmental ethics, which we need to create in a serious way if we are to continue to survive. For now, animal activists and others

like them are outside the mainstream—“crazy” people who tie themselves to trees. These acts are not part of the mainstream of society, a society which is not able to develop an effective environmental ethics that is in accord with the worldview that dominates our lives. A similar disjunction occurs in our hospitals because of the purely mechanical treatment of the human body, and the tensions that are created by the belief of many that they have a soul and that the body is not just a mechanical gadget. These tensions present great challenges to the dominant worldview and are signs that this paradigm is now falling apart.

THE REJECTION OF the idea of consciousness as the beginning not only of time but also of the universe, shatters all the deepest hopes of human beings. The hopes of immortality become mere dreams. That is why, for the first time in human history, we have a society in which many people do not dare to harbor these hopes that relate to the deepest needs of our souls, for they are no longer meaningful or realizable within the framework of a worldview based on the primacy of the material rather than consciousness.

These are the deepest aspirations of human beings—aspirations for immortality, that is, for an experience beyond time and space, for we are the only beings who are aware that we shall die. The diversions that we create for ourselves cannot completely veil this truth from us. Hence the significance of the hope for immortality, which is inseparable from the deepest nature of our souls. If we have come into being only from the matrix of time and space, we cannot transcend time and space. The reality of human life, whose terminus is the call of death, and what that implies spiritually, has, of course, been very strongly challenged by the reductionist worldview. I believe the time has come for us to take this challenge

seriously, to rethink what consciousness is in relation to our life, to the manner in which we live, to the world in which we live, and to our way of knowing—our sentience, our experience. It is also time to realize fully the consequences of the negation of the primacy of consciousness in all its import.

*If we reject the sacred,
reject that it is the wisdom
of God that is imprinted
upon the DNA, that all creation
bears the imprint of God—
a meaningless statement in
modern biology—where then does
the sacredness of human life
come from?*

I believe that ultimately consciousness will have the final say. But it is for us, while we have this great gift of consciousness, to use it properly, to understand what it means to live consciously, to live fully with awareness, to know where we are coming from, where we are going, and why we are here. □

Adapted from “In the Beginning of Creation Was Consciousness,” the Dudleian Lecture at Harvard University for 2002–03, given by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.