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Consciousness: Where We Are At

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Abstract: It is useful every couple of years to take a bird's eye view of consciousness studies and reflect on what we see. When I look, I still see two streams, one of which is the social and political framework for the study of consciousness, and the other of which is the substance of what we know about consciousness. The former is still largely defined by the extent to which the scientific study of consciousness has been freed from a materialist agenda. The latter includes recent research into the clarity of cognitive functioning in the absence of sufficient neurological support for it, after-death communication, experimenter effects in anomalies research, and the psychodynamics of entering transcendent states of consciousness. Taken together, these two streams appear to converge on the discovery of the depth and meaning of existence that is being revealed through consciousness research.
***Key Words*:** consciousness, qualia, mind, brain, after-death communication, experimenter effects, intentionality, nonduality.

At the inaugural conference of the *Society for Consciousness Studies* in 2014, I gave a talk titled "A Vision for the Society for Consciousness Studies" (Barušs, 2014) in which I gave an overview of the state of consciousness studies and the role that the Society could play in its development. It is helpful to step back every few years to revisit "where we are at" with the study of consciousness. A bird's eye view still reveals two streams, one of which is the social and political framework within which the study of consciousness takes place, and the other of which is the actual substance of the cutting edge of consciousness studies. I will address each of these in turn.

The Study of Consciousness

I will define consciousness as ongoing subjective experience. More precisely, "consciousness refers to subjective events suffused with existential qualia that occur privately for a person" (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017, p. 15). "Qualia" refers to the "raw feels" that accompanies the occurrence of subject events and "the expression *existential qualia* [refers] to the subjective feelings that anything is going on at all" (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017, p. 15). Qualia pose the "hard problem" of consciousness, in that it is not clear how they can emerge from a physiological or computational substrate.

As I see it, the main problem that is still faced by the study of consciousness is the entrenchment of materialism in the academy. Materialism is a false theory with poor goodness-of-fit to empirical evidence. In particular, materialism cannot explain matter, materialism cannot explain anomalous phenomena, and material-

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ism cannot explain consciousness. It is held in place through various mechanisms of social influence, such as:

1. inauthenticity, as captured by Martin Heidegger's notion of das Man (Barušs, 1996);
2. confirmation bias (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017);
3. bias blindness, with materialists being less likely than those tending toward transcendent beliefs to have examined their own ideas about reality (Barušs & Moore, 1998);
4. groupthink (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017);
5. trance logic (Barušs, 2003).

This situation can be rectified through authenticity and the engagement of critical thinking (Barušs, 1996) and by reclaiming the power that has been given over to materialists (cf. Kaplan, 2017).

Mind Without a Brain

One area of research that I think is opening up a gap between our understanding of consciousness and materialism is the study of altered states of consciousness in which there is clarity of cognitive functioning without sufficient physiological support to explain such functioning. These states include terminal lucidity and near-death experiences. Terminal lucidity refers to the occurrence of memory and mental clarity prior to death in someone whose brain has not supported such functioning for some time. Near-death experiences (NDEs) are experiences in which a person is close to death (or thinks that she is close to death, such as a fall from a mountain) during which time she appears to have had mental clarity during vivid experiences of various sorts. For instance, in one study, 45% of participants claimed that their thinking was "clearer than usual" during their NDE, and 29% claimed that their thinking was "more logical than usual" (Kelly, Greyson, & Kelly, 2007/2010, p. 386, footnote). In addition, the number of cases of apparent veridical perception during NDEs that are being reported in the academic literature appears to be increasing.

The point is this, that if consciousness is a by-product of brain activity, or computation instantiated in the brain, then degrading the brain will cause confusion, delirium, and loss of consciousness. A degraded brain, such as in cases of terminal lucidity and many NDEs, should not be able to support thinking that is "clearer" and "more logical" than usual. If lucid thinking and occasionally veridical anomalous perceptions occur in a brain that is demonstrably compromised, then there must be another explanation for them. And the rather obvious explanation is that consciousness does not need the brain for its existence. The point then is to determine the relationship between consciousness and the brain and the attributes of consciousness when freed from attachment to the brain (Barušs & Mossbridge, 2017).

After-Death Communication

In a 1973 poll, 27% of respondents believed that they had had contact with the dead, with 51% of widows registering such a belief. A decade later those numbers had risen to 42% and 67% respectively (Greeley, 1987). Another decade later, 74% of widows had "sensed the presence of the dead spouse" (Lindstrøm, 1995, p. 14). In another study it was found the 49% of next-of-kin of the deceased had had a "hallucination or significant dream" of the deceased (Barbato et al., 1999, p. 32). In a representative Icelandic sample in 1974–75,

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31% of respondents were reportedly "aware of the presence of a deceased person" (Haraldsson, 2012, p. 1). And, in yet another study, 48% of pet owners claimed to have sensed their pet's presence (Carmack & Packman, 2011). Why do we not hear about this inside the academy? Where is the research effort to try to understand these phenomena?

The conventional understanding is that these experiences are hallucinations, delusions, exaggerations, made-up stuff, and so on. One problem with such an explanation is that the numbers are simply too high. That means that these experiences are being reported by people who are not otherwise psychotic. And they include skeptics such as Michael Shermer, who experienced having his grandfather-in-law's broken radio suddenly start playing during his wedding ceremony (Shermer, 2014).

In his study of after-death communication (ADC), Erlendur Haraldsson (2012) found six distinctive features from his detailed examination of 449 accounts among the Icelandic population:

1. Over-representation of those who died violent deaths.
2. In some cases experiencers had not known at the time that the deceased had died.
3. In some cases there have been multiple witnesses to the sensed presence.
4. There have been encounters with unknown people who were later identified.
5. In some cases veridical communication has occurred.
6. In some cases there have been correct warnings of danger or apparent healing.

Similar features have been found by others (Barbato et al., 1999; Berger, 1995). They pose a serious challenge to conventional explanations but are consistent with the survival hypothesis.

Experimenter Effects

I have a reputation in some quarters as being the "failure to replicate guy" for failing to replicate electronic voice phenomenon (Barušs, 2001) and then failing to replicate retrocausal recall (Barušs & Rabier, 2014) raising considerable concern among their proponents. Of course, experiments in psychology have a poor record of replication anyway, with one study finding that 60 of 100 studies could not be replicated when a deliberate attempt was made to do so (Makel, Plucker & Hegarty, 2012). But the question is, am I creating a "damping effect" in my lab with my skeptical attitude? In other words, am I seeing experimenter effects in my lab?

Well, it seems to me that experimenter effects are just a tiny window on a global phenomenon. The evidence for anomalous input, i.e., remote viewing, and anomalous output, i.e., remote influencing, is robust. Both are spatially nonlocal and both can be time-displaced, so that we have spatial and temporal nonlocality. When we consider them together, we realize that we are always dynamically interacting with all events everywhere at all times! This raises the question of the parameters of such interactions. For instance, under what conditions can we demonstrate remote influencing? Under what conditions can remote healing occur? What are the roles of intention, meaning, will, and love in such interactions? What are the relevant psychological variables? I think that what is becoming apparent is that the ways in which we do research needs to change in order to accommodate these anomalous effects.

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Inverting Consciousness

There is considerable interest in persistent transcendent states characterized by a fundamental sense of well-being (e.g., Martin, 2014; Taylor, 2017). Given that one generally seeks to be in euphoric rather than dysphoric states, the issue arises of identifying the most effective techniques for creating a shift into such states. And given that these persistent transcendent states are often nondual, in the sense that the subject-object distinction seems to disappear, I want to consider for a moment the obvious technique of inverting consciousness back upon the subject as a way of breaking that duality.

Intentionality is ingrained in our Western intellectual tradition. With the use of the term "intentionality" I am referring to the putative structure of the mind whereby there is a subjective self which is directed toward the objects of one's experience. All three of these, the subject, the directedness, and the objects are component aspects of intentionality. The directedness can be depicted as an arrow from the self to an object (cf. Siewert, 2017). Suppose that we somehow shift our "focus" toward the object. Immersion in the object can result in flow states whereby a person is absorbed in the contents of her experience, perhaps to the point of losing any awareness of a self (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; 1990). Conversely, withdrawing identification from the objects, such as in mindfulness practices, and identifying with the subject can lead to disidentification, dissociation, and derealization, that can be experienced as euphoric or dysphoric (cf. Wallace, 2012, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In both cases, however, our subjective experience is still dual; it still has intentional structure.

Now, what happens if we deliberately attempt to invert consciousness by turning the arrow of intentionality back upon the subject? On the face of it, that seems like an impossible task. Clearly the subject as a subject cannot become an object. According to Alan Wallace, in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it is not an impossible task. We are to just do it (Wallace, 2016). So what happens?

Well, we can begin by using our ordinary sensory modalities to perceive what is happening within the interior of the body. This involves touch, proprioception, balance through the vestibular system, nociception, and interoception (de Vignemont, 2016) and, more generally, turning attention to the interior of the body can sometimes lead to an unveiling of intentionality "as if awareness is digging into, folding onto, or being sucked into the phenomenologically material 'stuff' of the meditating subject" (Louchakova-Schwartz, 2016, p. 265) with the attendant occurrence of various transcendent experiences.

We can also conceptualize this inversion of consciousness as using whatever perceptual mechanisms we use when we are remote viewing. Does remote viewing always have intentional structure? For James Carpenter (2012), we are already always engaged in remote viewing and influencing at a nonconscious level and such abilities may become engaged as we seek to perceive the subjective element of our consciousness. If nonconscious remote viewing is nondual, perhaps that nonduality can surface in the attempt to perceive the subjective element of consciousness.

But is inversion even perceptual at all, or does it primarily involve cognitive mechanisms, perhaps even some form of "direct knowing," whatever that might be? Upon careful scrutiny, the usual distinctions between per-

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ception, cognition, subject, object, conscious, and nonconscious, start to blur. And even though the psychodynamics are unclear, it appears that, in some cases, inverting consciousness, whatever that is, shatters the intentional structure, with the result that a person ends up in a nondual state of consciousness (Lingpa, 2016; Merrell-Wolff, 1937/2017).

Conclusion

I have considered the study of consciousness, mind without a brain, after-death communication, experimenter effects, and inverting consciousness. What can we say about this current edge of consciousness research? It seems to me that materialism stripped life of depth, richness, and meaning. However, the more we distance ourselves from materialism and the more deeply we investigate consciousness using different modalities, the more depth, richness, and meaning are restored to reality. Rather than being boring and meaningless, reality is turning out to be meaningful and interesting. Allowing ourselves to shift from the former to the latter can be an act of will that constitutes a continuous awakening.

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