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# Collective and Egoless Consciousness Significance for Philosophy of Science and for the Mind-Body Problem

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Collective consciousness and egoless consciousness can be regarded as realistic alternatives or complements to individual consciousness. This contention is supported by evidence from the literature (psychological, philosophical, anthropological, spiritual, Buddhist) and by personal observations and interpretations. It contradicts the idea that a philosophy which regards reality as consisting only of conscious experiences must inevitably lead to solipsism.

**I**N A previous paper (Randrup, 1997a) the author proposed a skepticist-idealist philosophy, claiming that reality consists entirely of conscious experiences. This proposal is seen as a more consistent and unified alternative to materialism. Science is regarded as a catalog of intersubjective, conscious experiences (“observations”) recognized as scientific and structured by means of concepts and theories (also regarded as conscious experiences). Materialism is seen as possible and useful within a certain (large) domain, but inconsistent beyond that domain. This view is supported by examples of contradictions and problems met in materialist science (in cognitive neurophysiology, the evolutionary study of cognition, statistics, physics, second-order cybernetics) and by the felt reality of intense nature experiences (Randrup, 1997a).

Philosophies of this type (idealism, phenomenism, skepticism) have been known in the West in modern times since the work of the philosophers Berkeley and Hume in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and have often been met with the objection that they entail solipsism (Randrup, 1997a). I will argue that solipsism (individualism) is only one possible frame of reference for consciousness. Collective

consciousness and egoless consciousness are seen as viable alternatives or complements.

## • Collective Consciousness •

**I**N DAILY life in Western countries, much is related to the individual, and the concept of the individual seems clear. In Western philosophy, however, there has been extended controversy over the notions of “self,” “individuality,” and “personal identity” (Gallagher, 1998; Gallagher & Shear, 1997-1999; Hardy, 1998, pp. 33-37; Hughes, 1999; Koffka, 1963, ch. 8; Kolak & Martin, 1991; Mach, 1914, ch. I, sect. 12; Noonan, 1996; Penelhum, 1967; Turkle, 1984, 1997; White, 1997). And in recent years, ideas of computer and brain networking, as well as studies of social interaction, have suggested to some authors a more collective concept of mind and consciousness (Artigiani, 1995; Burns & Engdahl, 1998; Freeman & Burns, 1996; Garfield, 1993; Graham, 1999; Gustavson & Harung, 1994; Huberman, 1989; Lánsky, 1999; Nuñez, 1997; Swing, 1999). Given this background, it does not seem so obvious, as is often assumed, that mind and consciousness are always associated with an individual, and that

regarding reality as consisting entirely of conscious experiences should therefore entail solipsism.

In various non-Western cultures, such as African, Aboriginal Australian, American Indian, East Asian, and “preconquest” cultures, views and attitudes are encountered which emphasize the collective and relational features of human beings and their minds at least as much as the individual features; indeed it seems that modern Western individualism is an exceptional or unique phenomenon among the world’s cultures, past and present (Carrithers, Collins, & Lukes, 1985, chs. 5, 6, 7, 8; Harris, 1997; Hayward, 1987, pp. 55, 211-212, 281; Kao & Sinha, 1997, chs. 3, 9, 16; Lommel, 1969, pp. 155, 159, 161; Mudimbe, 1987; Ndaw, 1983, ch. 3 and pp. 205-207; Wautischer, 1998, chs. 2, 3, 5). As an example of emphasis on the collective aspect, I quote Okuyama (1993), who writes about the three senses of self among the Japanese: the collective, the social, and the individual sense. Of these, the collective sense is seen as the most important and fundamental one. Okuyama states explicitly:

Japanese people commonly think that the self exists only in relationships with others...our mind is thought to exist in a field of relationships. The self cannot be considered separate from the relationship field nor having as clear a boundary, as Western people imagine...one of the conditions to be an adult is the ability to feel somebody else’s or the group’s feelings. (p. 29)

Accordingly, Okuyama believes that restoring a healthy collective sense of self is an important task for psychotherapy. (Very recently Okuyama [1999] has stated that she thinks the Japanese are now losing their collective sense of self with the result that many children and adolescents feel lonely and disconnected.)

Although individuality is so prominent in Western cultures and daily life, there are features of collectivity. “Objective” science seems to be an important example of this. In order to be recognized as scientific, an observation has to be confirmed by several scientists—become intersubjective. An intersubjective observation is often conceived as the same observation or experience distributed over different individual minds or consciousnesses and then unified by

means of an “objective” materialist concept. It can, however, also be conceived (and experienced) to be unified from the beginning as one observation constituting a part of a collective consciousness. Both of these interpretations of intersubjectivity contradict solipsism. The materialist concepts are usually projected “out there” and accorded an existence of their own, separate from consciousness. The latter step is intersubjective inside wide circles, but it has led to contradictions as mentioned in the introduction above and is not shared by all (Randrup, 1997a). If the metaphysics of objective materialism is given up, then the interpretation involving collective consciousness appears to be the natural way of expressing the unity of intersubjective observations. Since several intersubjective observations and theories exist in science, we may envisage that scientists, particularly individuals within one discipline, have a significant part of their consciousness in common, a collective consciousness. The collective part of their consciousness will be associated with the brains of all the persons involved and not only with one brain (brains here are seen as heuristic structures in the scientific catalog mentioned in the introduction).

Other parts of mind or consciousness appear to be more individual, but the boundary between individual and collective consciousness is blurred. If we talk together about our experiences, the intersubjective or collective part will be expanded. This aspect of intersubjectivity has been studied thoroughly by the phenomenological school of psychology at Copenhagen University (Rubin; Tranekjær Rasmussen; From). Tranekjær Rasmussen (1968, ch. 3, with references) writes that through communication it is possible to make certain conscious experiences “intersubjectively transportable” within a group of people. A set of intersubjectively transportable experiences is called a recursive basis. Such a recursive basis is established within scientific disciplines (technical languages), but Tranekjær Rasmussen writes that within the disciplines little has been done to state the recursive bases explicitly, and he thinks that working to accomplish this will be an important task for both epistemology and pedagogics. Obtaining intersubjectivity in psychology/psychiatry aided by communication between scientists has been described recently in detail

by Marchais, Grize, and Randrup (1995, p. 371), and Hardy (1998, pp. 180-184) has described how shared or interface “semantic constellations” can emerge from ordinary conversation. It has also been contended that many concepts such as “eleven,” “entropy,” and even “solipsism” cannot be individual at all, because from the beginning they are shaped by education and verbal communication (Jørgensen, 1963, p. 176; P. Marchais, personal communication, March 20, 1999; Thornton, 1996). Thus, for example, Thornton concludes that the concept “solipsism” is inherently incoherent.

Living and acting together can also enhance intersubjectivity and collective experience. The Danish philosopher and psychologist Jørgensen has discussed this in some detail (1963, ch. 7). He writes about “person-identification,” that is, identification with another person, and distinguishes between emotive and conative forms. The former refers to the catching effect of emotional expressions and the latter refers to situations where persons act together to reach the same goal. More recently Vaughan (1995) wrote in a similar way about emotive identification:

The soul that emphatically identifies with both the pain and the joy of others begins to see that in the inner world we are not separated from each other. Peace and joy, no less than pain and sorrow, are shared, collective experiences. (p. 5)

And in a recent special issue of the journal *ReVision* (Rothberg & Masters, 1998), several authors have given examples of collective and egoless consciousness in couples living and acting together in intimate relationships. It seems probable that living and acting closely together in smaller groups has contributed to the experience and concepts of collective consciousness encountered in various non-Western cultures.

It thus appears that there are means for sharing experiences which at first sight appear to be strictly individual and inaccessible to “other minds” (Randrup, 1999). This is an alternative to solipsism, and it recalls the old philosophical problem about the far side of the moon, which for many years was regarded as unobservable, until it finally became possible to observe it by means of space travel.

IN EGOLESS experiences, the ego, the self, is neglected or “forgotten.” There are many descriptions of such cases in the literature.

In reports of experiences regarded as spiritual or mystical it is often mentioned that there is a general feeling of unity including fading or complete disappearance of the boundary between subject and object. Dissolution of all ego boundaries and forgetfulness of the ego are also mentioned (Bastian, 1998; Cohen & Phipps, 1979, pp. 92, 111; Flier, 1995, p. 144; Marchais, Grize, & Randrup 1995, p. 381; Rothberg & Masters, 1998, pp. 16-17, 38-39; Smith & Tart, 1998, pp. 98, 100, 105; Stace, 1960, ch. 2; Vaughan, 1989, pp. 6, 8). In the literature about Buddhism and Indian philosophy, egolessness or “empty of ego” is discussed comprehensively. The moral accompaniment of egolessness is described as spontaneous compassion (Belfer, 1995; Epstein, 1989; Hayward, 1987; Joonho, 1999; Lindtner, 1998, pp. 11-12; Miller, 1996; Osho Rajneesh, 1997, ch.16; Pallis, 1998; Puhakka, 1998; Shakya, 1996, preface, chs. 2, 3, 5).

Some secular experiences are also described as egoless. Thus Mach (1914, ch. I, sect. 12) writes that during absorption in some idea the ego may be partially or wholly absent. Similar statements are given by Flier (1995, p. 144) and by Osho Rajneesh (1997, ch. 16). More detailed descriptions of single cases have been published by Koffka (1963, pp. 323-328) and by myself (Randrup, 1997a, pp. 21-22 [a personal experience]).

Still, in daily life in Western cultures, the physical and social world is most often perceived with the ego in a central position. Since thought is more flexible than perception, it is, however, possible to *think* of the world in other ways, decentered from the ego or even with another ego as the center. The change from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican view of the planetary system is an example of such decentering. Since then, science has continued the decentering process and developed an “objective” world view. Because of the flexibility of thought it is possible to switch between decentered views and views centered on an ego or a collective and thus incorporate knowledge gained by the use of one system into other systems. In this way it is possible to use

decentered scientific knowledge either for egoistical or collective purposes.

The decentered world of science is, however, most often considered as a material world projected "out there" and separate from the human mind. This makes it difficult to place "the observer" and consciousness in the scientific picture. In contrast, an egoless experience of the world (perceived or conceived) is still a conscious experience and thus avoids the dichotomies between observer and observed and between the material and the mental. On such a monistic background, worldviews centered on an ego, centered on a collective, or completely decentered (egoless) are not in conflict, but can be seen as different structures in the same catalog of conscious experiences or "observations." It is known that there can be more than one structure in a system of elements, for example, in ambiguous figures. These are perceived in two or more alternating gestalts only one at a time, but in thought it can be conceived that the two or more structures or gestalts exist simultaneously (Burling, 1964; Randrup, 1992, 1997b; Rosen, 1978, pp. 495, 500).

### ❖ Conclusion ❖

THE EVIDENCE and interpretations discussed above indicate that collective consciousness and egoless consciousness can be regarded as realistic alternatives or complements to the more generally accepted individual consciousness in Western cultures. This undermines the contention that a philosophy which regards reality as consisting entirely of conscious experiences must inevitably lead to solipsism.

### Notes

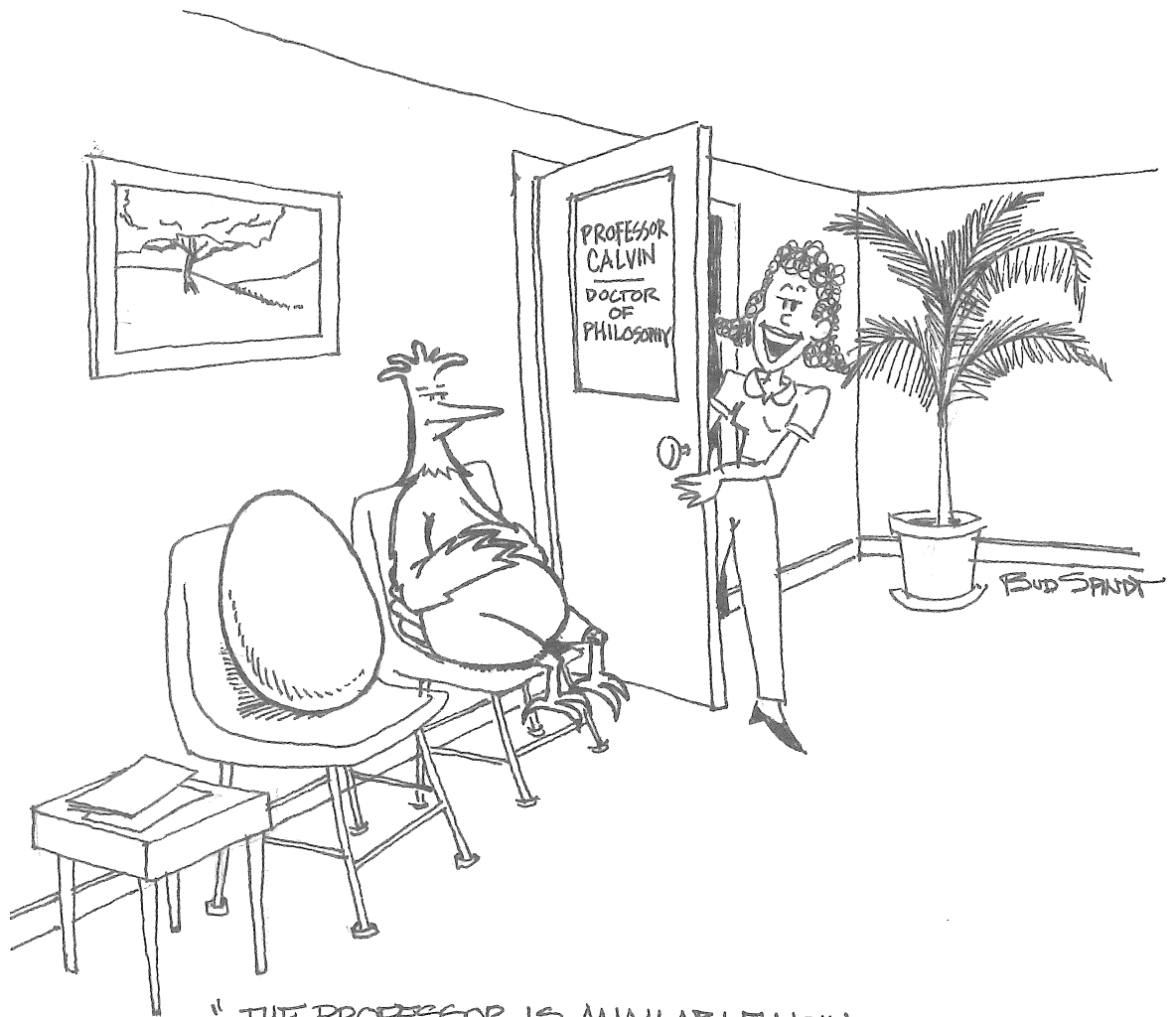
This paper is part of an ongoing study of idealist philosophy and follows an earlier paper (Randrup, 1997a). I thank colleagues inside and outside the Center for Interdisciplinary Research for discussions and comments about this paper, especially Pierre Marchais, Raymond Swing, and Philippe Gross.

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