

Is Consciousness Subject to the Principle of Dualism?

Franklin Merrell-Wolff
May 21, 1971

The suggestion has been made that the principle of dualism ascends all the way; that, in fact, that consciousness is subject to this principle. The idea expressed fails to properly understand the meaning of consciousness. Perhaps a word could clarify the confusion here. Consciousness is to be understood in two senses: one is our familiar consciousness, that to which we ordinarily refer. It appears as a relationship between a knower and a known and is to be identified with the Tibetan conception of *shes-rig*, that aspect of consciousness which is aware of phenomena. But the second sense in which we use the term has a very different meaning and, in fact, this may indeed be an extension of a conception beyond the legitimate use of it; but we do use it for the reason that there is no other term that carries the meaning so well. This is consciousness as understood as self-existent—not the consciousness of a self or an entity, but a consciousness which pre-exists all selves or all entities and, as well, all objects whatsoever. It is to be regarded as self-existent, as that which is entirely pure, which is unsullied and unsulliable, which is unmade, which, in a word, is primordial and to be regarded in this system as the Root from which all comes. All selves and all contents of knowledge are contained within this pure, Field Consciousness as potential. When it becomes actual, there is a projection outward in which there is produced a consciousness as relationship between a knower and a known; but this latter consciousness is to be regarded itself as an effect. And only in this sense of two types of consciousness could we say there is present in them the principle of dualism; but the consciousness as such in both cases is essentially incorruptible.

Corruption can come, and a dark and shadowy side contrasting with a light and luminous side, when we deal with the content of consciousness. And here we must understand content in that broad sense which includes not only objects but the coloring of the state of consciousness. It can be colored by mood and affect. It can be a consciousness as peace or a consciousness as turbulence. It can be a consciousness colored by delight or it can be colored by suffering and sorrow. It can be motivated by a vast, selfless goodwill or it can be motivated by a dark shadow of utter selfishness. All of this, however, is in the nature of an object in consciousness or a state superimposed upon it that colors it. The pure consciousness itself, whether taken in the sense of a relationship between a knower and a known, or in that higher sense of a consciousness that pre-exists both the knower and the known, whether taken in either sense, the consciousness itself is incorruptible. It is the content that can carry corruptibility. But, to be aware of that which is corrupt does not imply that the awareness is corrupt. The awareness is neutral whether it views corruptibility or purity. These are to be regarded as superimposed qualities, but the consciousness itself is colorless.

I find that there seems to be a considerable confusion in the understanding of what is meant by the idea of consciousness as I employ it. There seems to be a tendency to

treat it as a conception which is an object, a something that can be dealt with in terms of a content which is defined. This is to miss the point. To be sure, in discussion I use a term to refer to something that is not a content of consciousness, not an object before consciousness, but the container which is cognized by other than our ordinary methods. I have a suggestion here for our possible use of terms; let us use the word ‘conception’ to mean ideas that are defined and mean just what they’re defined to mean and then employ the term ‘notion’ to refer to terms that are either completely undefinable or only partially definable. They are terms that serve as pointers to a meaning that is entirely outside the processes of conceptual cognition. This might help in making the distinction. In this case, consciousness is a notion that is completely undefinable. The meaning is rather to be *evoked* than by taking a dictionary definition. There is a suggestion of this in the treatment of the term in Baldwin’s *Dictionary* which may be of help and so I shall quote it. The statement here is taken from Ladd’s *Psychology, Descriptive and Explanatory*:

‘Whatever we are when we are awake, as contrasted to what we are when we sink into a profound and dreamless sleep, that it is to be conscious. What we are less and less, as we sink gradually down into dreamless sleep, or as we swoon slowly away; and what we are more and more, as the noise of the crowd outside tardily arouses us from our after-dinner nap, or as we come out of the midnight of the typhoid fever crisis,’ that is consciousness.¹

Now it will be noted that this is not essentially a conceptual definition. It is a direct reference to an experience and only he who has the experience of going to sleep, or swooning away, and coming out of such states could identify the referent that is meant by the term ‘consciousness’. It is not a dictionary definition. It is thus a word that is essentially and wholly a pointer term. So let us call it a notion rather than a true concept, a complete undefinable, a term that refers to something that can be known only by experience or the imperience of the state and cannot be otherwise defined. From this term as a starting point we may elaborate into other conceptions that make use of the term in the definition of those conceptions, but the term itself remains eternally undefinable.² That’s a very important point. Now, in discourse involving the *notion* of consciousness, it is reduced to a term, but a term that points to a meaning beyond the conceptual order of cognition. That is peculiarly important in this case. With the vast bulk of other terms, we can employ conceptual definition usefully, but not in this case. I’d say to anyone, if you don’t know what consciousness is by your own immediate experience or imperience, you don’t know what I am talking about and no amount of definition would enable you to know it. You must know this meaning immediately. There is no other way. We might in some measure define every other term that is employed, but this one, preeminently out of

¹ James Mark Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Co., 1911), 216.

² For the definition of ‘imperience’, see the audio recordings “General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy,” part 10, and “On My Philosophy: Extemporaneous Statement.” In speaking of introceptual knowledge, Wolff says, “The third function therefore gives you imperience, not experience. It is akin to sense perception in the sense of being immediate, but is not sensuous.”

all terms, is an indefinable from which we start in our discourses as the unconscious assumption underlying all those discourses. This point is important.

Now, how do we know consciousness directly? Not by the process through which we know the contents of consciousness, for this is not normally a content of consciousness, but the carrier of the contents; and in discourse about it we have to treat it as though it were a content, though it is not. The contents are the objects before us; and, as I pointed out earlier, the principle of a dualism is characteristic of all those contents. We can know them only by the principle of contrast, by the being different one from the other. As I've said before: we know up by contrast with down; we know good by contrast with evil; and so on through all the dualities. But, only indirectly can we come to an understanding of the notion of consciousness. It actually is the simplest of all notions. It is that which is implied in any statement or action.

We do have a contrasting notion of unconsciousness, which, however, is only indirectly inferred because of the fact that contents enter into consciousness which ordinarily cannot be traced. As we continue in our search, we are forced to substitute for the term 'unconscious' the idea of another way of consciousness so that finally we have simply a contrast of one kind of consciousness with another kind or other kinds. And in this way we develop a view of a different form of functioning in the total meaning of consciousness. Thus, for instance, our ordinary relative consciousness may be viewed quite properly as a relationship between a knower and a known. We would regard this as what we might call "thin," as not having substance in itself. But underlying and supporting all of this, it may be realized that there is consciousness in another sense that acts as the *matrix* supporting this relative, thin consciousness. And it is this matrix consciousness which I call Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject or Field Consciousness, which unlike the relative consciousness, is substantive, is the container of all that is, the source of all that is. It may be identified with the notion of *Space* or even better with the notion of *Akasha*. Being substantive, it gives what might be called the "depth dimension" to content of consciousness.

How do we cognize it directly? This is not an easy act to describe. As I know the process, it involved two steps: first, the isolation of the self to consciousness; and in that process, as I have described it elsewhere, there was the problem of ceasing to project the self as a notion which was an object before consciousness.³ In the end, the self, as the pure subject, had to be realized by a sinking back into it, as it were, by something akin to starting a sentence that is never finished such as, "I am . . ." The isolation of the pure Consciousness was a subsequent step based upon a Realization in which consciousness became its own content, that which is always present and the unconscious assumption in any cognition or any statement whatsoever. Here there must be a turning of the apperceptive function upon itself instead of its moving out towards a content which is objective.

Here we may make an observation which has been made before but is in need of repeated formulation in order that the point may not be forgotten or overlooked. Consider the three elements: the content of consciousness with which we are most of the time particularly concerned, the subject to consciousness which is aware of those contents, and

³ See the audio recording "Yoga of Knowledge," part 3.

the consciousness itself. Ordinarily we think of consciousness as something that has been the resultant, perhaps, of an evolutionary process. No doubt this is true in connection with the relative consciousness that unites the knower to the known, but this is not true of the Root Consciousness or the Field Consciousness or that which I have called Consciousness-without-an-object-and-without-a-subject. That state which we call “unconsciousness” is so only with respect to the surface consciousness of the relationship between a knower and a known; but, with respect to the Root Consciousness, it is an eternally conscious condition.

Now a parallelism can be set up between these conceptions and the Buddhistic conceptions of *Sangsara*, *Nirvana*, and *Paranirvana*. While I cannot arbitrarily say that there is an identity between these sets of conceptions here, I am inclined to think there is. At any rate, there is a parallelism. Dealing with the content of consciousness, the object, that which is the world about in our consciousness, this we can either identify with or set up as parallel to the conception of *Sangsara*. In it lies all or process as well as all of multiplicity; it is, in a word, the *many*. As opposed to it, as the other of all of it, there is the Self that cognizes. This Self is unitary; it is the basis whereby the manyness and the processes of the world about are organized into the unity of my apperception. It brings therefore the principle of *oneness* into the picture, and this parallels the meaning applied to *Nirvana*. We have here then a contrast of two zones: the *many* and the eternally active, on one side, and the *one* and the eternally inactive, on the other; *Sangsara* and *Nirvana*—the object of consciousness and the subject to consciousness. But when we move from the consideration of these two to the Consciousness itself, we find that it is the integration of the duality of the *many*, on one side, and the *unity*, on the other, into that of which we can truly say it is not *one* and it is not *many*—the ultimate Root, not Being, but pure Be-ness.

We may suggest another parallelism by considering the conception of *Svabhavat*. It is said that *Svabhavat* is a Buddhist term for the Root Source of all that is. It is in a certain sense to be viewed as that from which both spirit and matter are derived. But with us, spirit is pure consciousness or that which is aware; whereas, matter is represented by the content or the object contained in consciousness. In our Root Consciousness, or Field Consciousness, we have a conception which at least parallels the conception of *Svabhavat* and may be identical with it. We have said that Root Consciousness is substantive. If we emphasize the substantive side, rather than the conscious side, then we could very well parallel our development by use of a conception such as that of *Svabhavat*, which, it has been pointed out, is identical with the conception of *Akasha*.

Another exceedingly interesting parallelism is to be derived from certain conceptions of twentieth century physics. Consider the modern notions of positive and negative matter. Two instances of this are as follows: first there is the conception of the electron, which is viewed as a charge of negative electricity; and then there is the positive conception, based upon certain experiences from research, of a positron, which is a positive charge of electricity of the same essential mass or magnitude as that of the electron. It is said that when these two particles meet they destroy each other as objective forms of matter and produce a flash of radiation. Now, there are certain considerations based upon astronomic and physical research which have led to the suggestion that in the great universe about us, the galactic universe in this case and not merely the stellar universe, there seems to be galaxies that are composed of positive matter and,

corresponding to them, other galaxies that are composed of negative matter. The difference between these two forms, it is suggested, is of this sort: that in the positive matter, which arbitrarily is identified with the matter which we know here, the nucleus of the atom is a positive charge and surrounding this nucleus there is a rotating body of negative charges which are known as electrons. In negative matter the reverse would be the case, the nuclear charge is conceived as negative and the rotating particles are positrons, which are positive. Now, it is conceived that if ever a negative galaxy, namely one consisting of negative matter, were to contact a positive galaxy, or one consisting of positive matter, the two would destroy each other. But this is not a destruction in the sense of becoming nothing at all; but would be a transformation of the matter into a state of radiation, radiation consisting of electromagnetic wave systems which project out into what *seems* to be empty space, that is, seems to be from our ordinary standpoint, but may be otherwise viewed, as I have pointed out elsewhere.⁴

Now, it is conceived that in these two states, the one which would consist of material particles and the one which is a state of radiation, have certain features which are unaltered. In other words, there is an equivalence between the two states. The name that is given to this that remains invariant in the two states is “energy-momentum.” Why this term should have this use may be clarified by the following illustration. Probably all of us have seen either physically or on television, ice skaters who rotate rapidly upon their skates. They may start with their arms extended and rotate at a relatively slow rate. Then they drop their arms slowly or rapidly to the sides of their body and their rotation is radically increased in its rate. Something remains constant between the slow rotation and the rapid rotation, and that is called momentum—momentum which is a product of the rate of rotation and the distance of the average of the matter in the rotating object from the center of the rotation. When the arms are extended, the average distance of the matter from the center or axis of rotation is greater than when the arms are held at the sides of the body; therefore, for the two states to be equal in momentum, since the momentum is the product of the rate of rotation and the average distance of the matter from the center of rotation, the speed of rotation when the arms are not extended must be increased so that the momentum may remain invariant. Perhaps this illustration will clarify the meaning of energy-momentum. The meaning is this: that the energetic value of the two states of ultimate substance, namely, that of the positron and the electron or of positive and negative matter, and the energetic value of the flash of radiation is the same. The energy-momentum, thus, is the invariant.

Now, to return to our figure of the object of consciousness, and the subject of consciousness, and the consciousness itself: the state of matter as electron and positron corresponds to the object of consciousness; the state of radiation corresponds to the subject to consciousness; and energy-momentum corresponds to the pure Root Consciousness or Field Consciousness which remains invariant. Or again, picking up the correspondence to the three Buddhistic terms, *Sangsara*, *Nirvana*, and *Paranirvana*, the state of tangible matter, electron and positron, corresponds to *Sangsara*, the state of pure radiation corresponds to *Nirvana*, and energy-momentum corresponds to *Paranirvana*. We have,

⁴ See the audio recording “Further Thoughts on the Relation of Buddhism and the Vedanta with Special Reference to the Philosophy of Sri Aurobindo,” part 3.

thus, a trinitarian principle of wide application to the interpretation in objective science as well as in our fundamental psychological development.