

# **The Philosophy of Consciousness Without an Object**

A Discussion of the Nature of Transcendental Consciousness

by Franklin Merrell-Wolff

Part 1 of 25

## **PART I**

### **The Ground of Knowledge**

#### **CHAPTER 1**

##### **The Idea and Its Reference**

###### **PREFACE**

While the present work presupposes acquaintance with my earlier volume *Pathways Through to Space*, yet it may be read independently. The earlier contribution is a record of transformation in consciousness written down during the actual process itself and, thus, while it supplies a peculiarly intimate view, yet loses thereby something of the objective valuation which only distance can contribute. In the present volume a recapitulation of the record, written after the fact, forms the material of the second chapter. The perspective in this case is naturally more complete. As a result, the interpretative thought, which follows as the implication of the transformation, possesses a more explicit logical unity. The earlier writing was, of necessity, more in the form of a stream of ideas, composed as they welled up into the foreground of consciousness, rather than a systematic development. The writing was true to the thought of the day or the moment and synoptic in form in so far as it was related to the development of conceptions. Many problems were left incompletely handled, and this was done knowingly, with the intention subsequently to develop the thought more fully. The present book was planned to fill the gaps left in the earlier work.

However, despite my intention to write a logically organized system, I found, somewhat to my embarrassment, the thought persisted in growing in directions I had not foreseen. Formal systematic organization broke down again and again as the flow burst over the dams of preconceived structure. As a result, the present work is only somewhat more systematic than the *Pathways* but falls short of the requirements of a completed system. Clearly the time is not yet ripe for the rounding out of all parts. Some problems have received a clearer elucidation, but in the process others have arisen that remain unfinished.

He who knows the Awakening becomes something of a poet, no matter how little he was a poet before. No longer may thought remain purely formal. The poet pioneers, while the intellect systematizes. The one opens the Door, while the other organizes command. The functions are complementary. But in this combination there are difficulties as well as advantages. The thought that seeks the rounded system, which shall

stand guarded on all sides, ever finds new Doors opening in unexpected places and, then, reorganization becomes necessary. The vistas appearing through each new Opening are far too valuable to be ignored and, besides, Truth cannot be honestly denied. So the system is never closed. I beg the critic to indulge this flaw, if flaw it is.

In the present volume I have found it even logically impossible to disregard the personal factor. By preference I would have written as Spinoza wrote, but in this day we are no longer free to disregard the epistemological problem. No longer can we take conceptions at their face value as carriers of Knowledge. Since the work of Kant we must ever question the authority of all conceptions. Always it is asked, what do the conceptions mean? And in general, they mean a somewhat which is not itself a conception. How, then, is the acquaintance with this somewhat, itself, attained? When the reference is to ordinary experience, the problem is simple enough and may often be assumed, but the Way of Consciousness which becomes available through the transformation is far from the beaten track, so it cannot be taken implicitly, if one would do the reader justice. For that reason a review of the process of transformation is introduced to provide the ground on which the more systematic discussion rests.

Today it is not necessary to prove that there are states of mystical consciousness possessing positive individual and social value. Too many writers of proven intellectual and scientific competency have given serious attention to the subject and demonstrated not only the actuality of mystical states of consciousness but have found the results for feeling and character development excellent, at least in many instances. I can list the names of men like William James, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, James H. Leuba, and Alexis Carrel, to say nothing of the great German Idealists who have either written directly from the awakened mystical sense or, at least, know full well its actuality. But with the exception of William James and the German Idealists, there is a general tendency among such students to claim that no true knowledge of reality and of the "thing-in-itself," can come from the mystical experience. As a result, the primary problem of the present work is the demonstration, so far as may be, of the actuality of noetic value springing from mystical or gnostic roots. I was forced, therefore, to give serious attention to philosophical and psychological criticism and develop my thesis with an eye to the pitfalls indicated by such criticism. Much of this criticism is distinctly challenging and may not be lightly brushed aside. To him who has the poet's insight or the intuitive feeling of the unfettered religious nature, much of the critical part of the discussion will appear unnecessary and many modes of formulation unduly devious and recondite. To such I would say: "Be patient, and remember I am not writing only for those who believe easily. Know you not that there are men of intellectual power and honesty in this world who view you patronizingly as little, well-meaning but credulous children? I would command for you respectful attention even though there may be much honest disagreement."

## CHAPTER 1

### The Idea and Its Reference

#### Section 1

The office of great philosophy is to be a *Way* of Realization, and not solely a monitor of *doing*. This the ancients knew well, but in these later more sordid days this truth is all but forgotten. The serious citizen of the present-day world may well blush when he thinks of what must be the judgment of the future historian who, when he writes of our age, notes how superb genius and skill served mainly the mundane needs and convenience of a “plantigrade, featherless, biped mammal of the genus *Homo*” in its adaptations to environment, or else studied how very intricate and technical devices might be adapted to the destruction of that same mammal in the most unpleasant way conceivable. Indeed, when knowledge serves such ends, ignorance is preferable. But though it is ill enough when technical knowledge finds no more worthy objective, far worse and darker is it when the royal Queen of Knowledge is dragged down to the status of handmaiden of earthly science. Admittedly, by its very form and method, earthly science can find its ultimate justification only in doing, but it is the true office of philosophy to serve a more worthy and ultimate end. For the eternal function of the Divine Sophia is to supply the knowing which serves *being* first of all and *doing* only in so far as action is instrumental to that being.

The present sad estate of much philosophy is largely the result of a critical acumen which has run far ahead of the unfoldment of balancing insight. Far be it from me to question the valid functions of the critical spirit, for I would be among the last who would care to abide in a fool’s castle of illusion, but criticism by itself leads only to the dead end of universal skepticism. To be sure, this skepticism may be variously disguised, as revealed in statements such as “all knowledge is only probable knowledge,” or “knowledge is only warranted assertibility which is tested by how far it serves adaptation of an organism to its environment,” or it may lead to the outright denial that there is any such thing as Reality or Truth. But in any case, certainty is lost with even the hope that certainty may ever be found. There are men of strange taste who seem to like the resultant gambler’s world of complete uncertainty wherein nothing may be trusted and only illusions are left to feed the yearning for belief. But for all those of deeper religious need, the death of hope for certainty is the ultimate tragedy of absolute pessimism—not the relative pessimism of a Buddha, a Christ, or a Schopenhauer, who each saw the hopeless darkness of this dark world as well as a Door leading to the undying Light, but rather a pessimism so deep that there is no hope for Light anywhere. Somewhere there must be certainty if the end of life is to be more than eternal despair. And to find this certainty something other than criticism is required.

As the stream of experience passes by us, we find no beginning and no end. With our science we slash arbitrary cuts across that stream and find innumerable relations intertwining indeterminate parts that we can define and organize into systems with considerable skill. But as to the ultimate nature of the parts in relation we know nothing at all. From whence the stream and whither? That is the question which centuries and millennia of knowledge grounded only in the empirically given has never been able to

answer. Hopeless is the estate of man if the source of all he knows is experience and nothing more.

But is there, mayhap, a source of knowledge other than experience and its (supposedly) one-parented child, the concept? The great among the ancients have affirmed that there is, and so have others throughout our racial history. I, too, affirm that there is this third organ of knowledge and that it may be realized by him who strives in the right direction. And I, also, confirm those ancients who say that through this other organ the resolution of the ultimate questions may be found and a knowledge realized that is not sterile, though its form may be most unexpected. But do the barricades of modern criticism leave room for the forgotten Door? I believe that they do once the structure of criticism is carefully analyzed and that which is sound is separated from that which is unsound. For philosophic criticism is no authoritarian absolute competent to close the door to testimony from the fount of immediacy.

## Section 2

Kant's *Critique*<sup>1</sup> seems to have established this important proposition: The pure reason by itself can establish judgments of possibility only and can predicate existence of that possibility solely as a possibility. In order to predicate actuality of an existence, something more is required. In general, the predication of actual existence becomes possible by means of the empiric material given through the senses. The combination of the principles of pure reason and the material given through the senses makes possible the unity of experience whereby raw immediacy can be incorporated in a totality organized under law. This establishes a basis for confidence in the theoretic determinations of science as such, with all that follows from that. But there are demands within human consciousness that remain unsatisfied by this integration. Kant was aware of this fact and tried to resolve the problem in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, but he failed to achieve any adequate ground for assurance. Thus we stand today in a position where for thought there is no certain but only probable knowledge.

In the present philosophic outline I do not challenge the essential validity of the above conclusion, drawn from *The Critique of Pure Reason*. I accept the principle that *pure* thought can give only judgments of possible existence. But I go further than Kant in maintaining that in the total organization of consciousness there are phases which are neither conceptual nor empiric—the latter term being understood as consciousness-value dependent upon the senses. I draw attention to such a phase which, while not commonly active among men, has yet been reported by a few individuals throughout the span of known history, and maintain that I have myself realized at least some measure of the operation of this phase. This phase has been known in the West under a number of designations, such as “Cosmic Consciousness,” “Mystical Insight,” “Specialism,” “Transhumanism,” and so forth. In the Orient it has been given a more systematic treatment and designation. Thus, it is recognizable under the terms ‘*Samadhi*’, ‘*Dhyana*’, and ‘*Prajna*’. The character of this phase of consciousness, as it has been represented in

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<sup>1</sup> *The Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant, the most important work in the whole of Western philosophical literature.

existent discussions and as revealed in my own contact with it, is of the nature of immediate awareness of an existential content or value. This immediacy is of a far superior order as compared to that given through the senses, for the latter is dependent upon the instrumentality of sensuous organs and functions. As compared to experience through the senses, this rarer phase of consciousness gives a transcendent value immediately and renders possible the predication of its existence in a judgment without violating the fundamental principles laid down by Kant.

An epistemological critique of this transcendental phase of consciousness is possible only by one in whom it is operative. This is true for the reason that the epistemologist, unlike the psychologist, can work only upon the material he actually has within his own consciousness. His is the inside view, while the psychologist, so long as he is only a psychologist, is restricted to the material that can be observed externally. Thus, the epistemologist is concerned with an analysis of the base of judgments of significance and value, while the method of the psychologist confines him to the field of judgments concerning empirically existent fact. As a consequence, the findings of the psychologist are irrelevant with respect to the more interior field of value and meaning. Failure to keep this fact in mind has produced a considerable confusion and heartache that was quite unnecessary.

The problem before us at this point is largely outside the reach of the psychologist, as it is concerned with value and meaning and not with observable existences, save only in very incidental degree. Very likely, the operation of the transcendental phase of consciousness, which is predicated here, may have coordinate effects which can be observed by the psychologist, and perhaps even the physiologist. But whatever may be thus observed has no bearing upon the standing of the inner and directly realized value and meaning. Apparently, deviation from psychological and physiological norm may be, and indeed has been, noted. Often this deviation from norm has been interpreted as an adverse criticism of the directly realized meaningful content. This procedure is both unscientific and unphilosophical, for it involves the blind assumption that the virtue of being superior attaches to the norm as such. By applying this same method consistently within, say, the setting of the life and consciousness of the Australian Bushmen, we would be forced to an adverse judgment relative to all the higher human culture in all forms. As many of our psychologists and physiologists do not actually maintain this consistent position, we are forced to the conclusion that they permit personal prejudice the determinant part in their valuations.

In current discussions it has been frequently noted that some concepts refer to sensuously given existences directly, while others do not. These existences have been called "referents." This leads to the formulation: Some concepts have referents while others do not. Generally the former concepts are given the superior validity and the latter only such validity as they may acquire by leading to concepts that do have referents. Indeed, there are some writers who deny that there is any such thing as a concept, and admit only words. In any case, the concepts, or words, without referents, are viewed as mere abstractions. Now, while it may be valid to regard concepts as important only in so far as they lead to referents, it is an arbitrary assumption to maintain that the referent must always be an empirically given fact. The referent may be a content given by the transcendent phase of consciousness immediately. In this

case, the abstract concept may have as genuine reference-value as the more concrete ideas. It is only through the mystical awakening that this question can be answered positively. It is part of the thesis of the present work that abstract concepts, or at any rate some abstract concepts, do in fact mean a content that can be realized immediately. Thus the most abstract phase of thought can lead to meaning at least as directly as concrete ideas. But this meaning is not a sensuously given content.

A fundamental implication is that some conceptual systems may be regarded as *symbols* of transcendental meaning. Perhaps we may regard this symbolical form of reference as characteristic of all concepts with respect to all referents, whether empiric or transcendental. Some of the more mature branches of modern science seem to be arriving at such an interpretation of their own theoretical constructions. Thus, in current physics the constructions are often spoken of as models which mean a reality or referent which in its own nature is not thinkable. The model, then, is not a mere photographic reproduction but a thinkable and logical pattern which corresponds to the observed relationships in the referent. Such a pattern is a symbol, though perhaps not in the special sense in which Dr. C.G. Jung uses this term. At any rate, in this case it is a symbol of relationships. In the transcendental sense the symbol would represent substantialities. We have here, then, the essential difference between the intellect as used in science and as employed in connection with metaphysics. In the one case it supplies a symbol for relationships, in the other a symbol of substantial realities.

The primary value of the intellect is that it gives command. By means of science, nature is manipulated and controlled in ever-widening degree. This fact is too well known to need elaboration. The same principle applies to transcendent realities. Through the power of thought this Domain, too, becomes one which can be navigated. Immature mystics are not navigators, and therefore realize the transcendent as a Sea in which their boats of consciousness either drift or are propelled by powers which they, individually, do not control. In such cases, if the boats are controlled, other unseen intelligence does the work. Many mystics give this controlling power the blanket name of "God." The real and genuine reference here is to a Power beyond the individual and self-conscious personal self that is realized as operative but not understood in its character. On the other hand, the mystic who has control may drop the term 'God', with its usual connotations, from his vocabulary. However, he knows that the term does refer to something quite real though very imperfectly understood by the larger number of mystics. This control depends upon the development of understanding and thought having quite a different order of reference from that which applies to experience through the senses.

### Section 3

The empirically given manifold of fact that constitutes the raw material of physical science is not itself the same as science, nor does it become so simply by being collected, recorded, and classified. To raise this body of fact to the status of science it must *all* be incorporated within an interpretative theory which satisfies certain conditions. Two of these conditions are fundamental and ineluctable. First, the interpretative theory must be a logical and self-consistent whole from which deductive inferences can be drawn. This is an absolute necessity of science as such. Second, the theory must in addition be so selected and formulated that the sequential train of inferences therefrom

shall at some stage suggest an empirically possible experiment or observation which can confirm or fail to confirm the inference. This condition is not a necessity of science in the ontological sense, but it is an essential part of *empiric* science. This condition peculiarly marks the radical departure of modern science as contrasted to the science of the scholastics and of Aristotle. It is a principle of the highest pragmatic importance and is the prime key to the Western and modern type of control of nature. Now, any organization of a collection of observed facts that satisfies these two conditions is science in the current sense of the word.

But while the above two principles are the only two necessary conditions for defining a body of knowledge as scientific, in the current sense, yet in practice scientists demand more. There is a third condition which serves convenience and even prejudice rather than logic. This is the requirement that the interpretative theory shall be congruent with already established or accepted scientific points of view, unless it is well proven that this third condition cannot be satisfied without violating the first or second. The long resistance to the acceptance of the Einstein dynamics was due to the fact that the relativity theory violated the third condition, though conforming to the first two. Only with reluctance could the body of scientists be induced to abandon the classical mechanics of Newton. For many years the latter was lovingly patched up with the baling wire of *ad hoc* hypotheses, and the body of scientists—very much like a conservative farmer attached to a tumbledown wagon, ancient team, and disintegrating harness, held together and kept going by every device of ingenuity, and hating the modern truck that has been offered him as a present—refused to have anything to do with the new theory, even though it satisfied the first condition with exceptional beauty. But, ultimately, because the relativity theory met the test of the second condition and the Newtonian view had indubitably lost its logical coherence in the domain of electrodynamics, due to heavy patching, the former was, perforce, accepted. This bit out of the history of science simply illustrates the fact that the third condition is merely arbitrary in the logical sense. However, it must be acknowledged that this condition does have a degree of practical and psychological justification. It is part and parcel of the conservative spirit which someone has given a rather aphoristic formulation in the following terms: “So long as it is not *necessary* to change, it is necessary *not* to change.” Change that is too rapid for adjustment and assimilation is not without its danger.

The danger of change is a danger to the all too human nature of the scientist and not a danger to science itself. The third condition exists for the protection of the scientist because he is a human being, and is quite irrelevant so far as science as such is concerned. I have talked to scientifically oriented minds and developed conceptions implying or explicitly affirming the reality of the transcendent, to which they took no logical exception, but they then drew the protecting robes of the third condition about themselves and withdrew to what they imagined was the safety of their enclosure. It is not wise to treat scared children too roughly, and in so far as the third condition is used as a protective *temenos* for the fallible human nature of the scientist, it should be respected. But this third condition is no real part of science as science and may not be properly invoked to discredit the truth of any interpretative construction.

Today in the vast domain of the biopsychological sciences—which include the whole of man in so far as he is an object for science—and in much of philosophy, the

predominant orientation is to Darwin. Darwinism has a twofold meaning, of which the lesser aspect is innocent and creditable enough, but the larger aspect of which is a sinister force—perhaps the most sinister—that seriously threatens the ultimate good of the human soul.

In the narrower sense, Darwin gave us a major scientific contribution. Through the facts observed by Darwin the notion of organic evolution is drawn into the focus of consciousness with a well-nigh irrefragable force. So far the contribution of Darwin is positive and, I believe, permanent. But in the larger sense Darwinism involves a good deal more than this. The evolutionary process is interpreted as a blind and mechanical force operating in the primordial roots of life and responsible for every development including man, even the most cultured. The facts may, and I believe do, require some conception of evolution for their interpretation. But there are other conceptions of the nature of evolution, differing radically from Darwin's idea that do interpret the facts, or may be adapted to such interpretation. Evolution may be conceived as the technique of an intelligent process, and it may be conceived comprehensively as the complement of an involutory process. Evolution thus conceived is not part of Darwinism in the invidious sense.

The first two conditions of scientific method do not impose the blind and mechanical view of evolution as a scientifically necessary interpretation. The orientation on the part of scientists to this radically anti-transcendental view is merely in conformity with the artificial third condition. Yet it must be confessed that the mechanistic interpretation does have certain advantages. To those who hate mystery it seems as though here we have a key for understanding life, in all its elaborations, that is directly and objectively understandable. Thus the senses and the intellect are all that is necessary for the conquest of life. There is much of illusion in this. For when the biologist falls back on the chemist to explain his vital phenomena, the chemist gives him cold comfort when he says that he does not find chemical phenomena adequate to meet the requirements of the biologist; and then when the biologist turns to the most basic physical science of all, namely, physics, he finds that since 1896 physics has laid the foundation for mysticism with a vengeance, and the materialistic biologist is left without fundamental support for his interpretative view.

The idea that in the purely naturalistic sense there is a tendency in living organism to rise in the scale is by no means a scientifically established fact. To be sure, we do find a vast difference of level in the hierarchy of living creatures, reaching from the mineral or near the mineral to the Buddhas, but it is not a scientifically established fact that this difference of elevation is not due to periodic or continuous impingement of energy from transcendental roots. If the cause of rise in the scale is transcendental, then it is not *naturalistic*.<sup>2</sup> Apart from this consideration—which for the moment I shall treat as only speculative—there is strong positive evidence that in the purely naturalistic sense all function in nature tends toward degradation. The physicists tell us that in all their observation from the laboratory up to astrophysics they find no exception to the second law of thermodynamics. In simple terms, this law says that all energy tends to flow down

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<sup>2</sup> 'Naturalism' here is taken to mean the theory that sensuously observed Nature is *all* that there is of Reality.



hill, that is, from centers of high concentration to regions of low concentration, as from the stars to the depths of space. And further, energy is available for work only while it is on this flow, and is lost in the final stage of dissemination. All of this simply leads to the view that the purely naturalistic tendency is toward degradation.

Are we not justified in viewing life as some kind of energy? Would not such a view be a peculiarly consistent application of the third condition because it constitutes an extension of an already accepted scientific viewpoint? But if natural life is to be viewed as an energy, is there not then a strong presumption that this energy does not constitute an exception to the general law which seems to be universally confirmed by the observation of the physicist? If the answer to these three questions is affirmative, it follows that we must view natural life, taken in isolation from any transcendental impingement of energy, as tending toward degradation. The consequences of such an altered viewpoint are far reaching. For instance, the ethnologist would no longer find justification for viewing the culture of so-called primitive man as the interpretatively significant root-source of higher culture, since this primitive culture would actually be degraded culture and thus not a root but the near end-term of a process of degradation. We would no longer be justified in viewing something like the voodoo as the primitive form of religious consciousness, or the seed from which ultimately flowered the higher religious consciousness, but we would see in this form of religious practice the degraded state of religion—that which religion becomes in the hands of a race moving toward extinction. As another instance we would find that the reductive interpretation in analytic psychology would lose all really significant value.<sup>3</sup>

Later in this volume I shall have occasion to develop more fully the line of argument sketched above in its relation to much current psychological interpretation of mystical states of consciousness. For it appears that most of the disparagement found in such interpretations develops from the prejudicial attitude growing out of a predilection for the invidious extension of Darwinism. For the present I am concerned only with the development of a general orienting preview in relation to the general reference of ideas.

#### Section 4

The following chapter is introduced to establish a ground of knowledge upon which the body of subsequent interpretation is largely based. This mainly descriptive-narrative statement is to be understood as having the same methodological significance that attaches to the laboratory record in the development of scientific theoretical interpretation. But in this case the immediately given material is not of the objective sort studied in scientific laboratories; it is that which is found by a predominantly conscious penetration of the subjective pole of consciousness. In this case that which corresponds to the raw material of scientific theory are the qualities or states found by piercing into the “I” rather than by observing the “not-I.” A referential ground for interpretation of this

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<sup>3</sup> In analytic psychology the standpoint which views the reference of complexes welling up from the unconscious as being due to causal factors which lie in the conscious field of the past is called “reductive.” This stands in contrast to the “constructive” standpoint which views such complexes as symbolically meaning, or also meaning, an end to be developed in the future. See “Definitions,” Chapter XI, in Jung’s *Psychological Types*.

sort is far from being a commonplace in the sense that all the objective material of scientific theory may be called commonplace, since the latter is, in principle, available to any so-called five-sense consciousness. Very few human beings have conscious familiarity with the zone in question, but there is a few who do, and they understand each other when they meet. This latter fact is of the very highest significance, for it reveals that the subjective realm is not something absolutely unique in an individual and having nothing in common with anyone else. Unquestionably there are detailed features of the subjective zone which are unique, as one individual is contrasted with another individual and as one type of individual is set off by another type. But these variants grow less and less with the depth of penetration, while there is a progressive growth in congruency of insight which in the end tends to become absolute. At the very center stands Enlightenment, which is fundamentally the same for all men. I must leave this statement in dogmatic form since it can neither be proved nor disproved in objective terms.

The initial and most superficial stage of the subjective penetration is, admittedly, intensely personal, for no man can start at any point save that of himself, a concrete individual living at some particular point in time and space. An early danger of the Way is that of becoming entrapped in this purely personal subjectivity for an indefinite period of time. But he who is caught at this point has scarcely taken the first step on the ladder. The real penetration lies beyond the personal self. Reaching beyond the personal stage the "I" rapidly grows in impersonality until it acquires the value of a Universal Principle. Thus the inner ground is a common ground just as truly as is the objective content of consciousness common to all men. As empiric scientists, in general, understand each other's way of thinking, so those who know some measure of the impersonal "I" understand each other's peculiar language, at least in its primary reference. To be sure, there are variants here, just as there are differences of scientific specialty which restrict the completeness of mutual understanding. In general, a specialist in subatomic physics would not talk the specific language of a specialist in biology, yet with respect to the general determinants of empirical science as such there is mutuality of understanding. The analogue of this is definitely to be found among the mystics. And this fact is a real cause for confusion on the part of the non-mystical investigator of mystical states of consciousness. There are agreements and differentiations not hard for him who has Vision to understand, but which are hopelessly confusing to the uninitiated.

In the record given in the next chapter, part of the material is doubtless unique with respect to the individual. In this respect there are several divergences from other records that can be found in literature. But very soon the content acquires a progressively universal character. Proof of this can be found, likewise, by reference to the appropriate literature. It is this more universally identical content that constitutes the main ground of reference of the later interpretation. Indeed, there is here a common ground for all men, but generally it is lost in the Unconscious, yet waiting, ever ready to be revealed when the Light of Consciousness turns upon Itself toward Its Source.