

Thinking About Consciousness

In his keynote address at the Association conference last October (1996) Harville says that a new ontology or meta-theory or cosmology is necessary for Imago theory, because current theories of therapy are imbedded in the Newtonian cosmology which is inadequate for understanding the self or even the existence of consciousness. Matthew Fox seemed to support this in his own presentation. And since how we understand such things shapes the assumptions we make about ourselves and human interactions, it impacts how we interact with clients. And I understand that is what makes such meta-theory essential. Such a new and more adequate cosmology, although talking about our essence and being theoretically abstract, can have practical impact on how we interact with couples. Contemplating the fact of consciousness, what it is, and how it operates can tie our therapeutic work with couples to a much larger context.

Here is what I understand Harville is proposing as such a new cosmology for Imago theory. Because consciousness is the "stuff" of the universe, consciousness is our essence. We are conscious pulsating energy interacting in a field of conscious pulsating energy making up the "tapestry of being". It follows that we are interconnected with every bit of organized energy which is also conscious. Consciousness, then, is connectivity.

When we understand, in accordance with quantum theory, that the self is an organization of waves (rather than a structure), the context (or "between") in which we interact assumes central importance. The context in which the self has possible existence is what brings the self into actuality. The context organizes and constellates the self in each instance of the self's existence.

Such understanding is critical to Imago therapy because it helps us to understand that who we are is constellated in what is happening "between" us in relationship. This posits the relationship or the "between" as prior to the individual self. And the dialogue we teach and in which we coach couples shapes that "between" in a positive way, using intentionality to expand the experience of each person to include a greater awareness of their connectedness with the other. Because consciousness is connectivity, the heightening of the experience of connectivity within the self means a fuller actualization of consciousness in both partners.

I hope that is not so succinct as to be indecipherable, but I wanted to make it brief enough to show its basic framework. And I wanted to indicate that I can see the logic to Harville's thinking. But that does not mean that I actually understand what he is saying or that I am able to judge whether it is a valuable or a questionable addition to Imago theory. While I enjoy playing with the notions of quantum physics and the prospect of having scientific backing for a new paradigm in which to work, I have some problems. As I explore the material written on the subject of consciousness, I am overwhelmed by the complexity of the issues involved and humbled by the erudition of those committed to competing points of view regarding consciousness.

Until I can begin to understand the differences between nonnaturalism (which I think is Harville's position), principled agnosticism, anticonstructive naturalism, eliminativist naturalism, and constructive naturalism, just to name a few philosophical positions regarding consciousness that I have become aware of in my readings, I wouldn't have the foggiest notion of how to think about all of this. I don't know how to judge any given position. Various ones of them involve not only psychological, but also philosophical, scientific, and

mathematical issues which seem beyond my grasp. So I wouldn't know whether a position was a dyed-in-the-wool Newtonian throwback to the past or theorizing that should be relegated to the category of some half-baked ideas seeking shelter under a new age mysticism. I certainly would be wary of espousing any of it as if I knew what I was talking about.

But to come back to Harville. He obviously does not mean by consciousness the notion of awareness as it is commonly defined in the dictionary and used in common parlance. Wanting to speak of it in its essence, he means more than the normal state of conscious life. He sometimes speaks of it abstractly as nature's agenda ("what is trying to happen here"), an agenda which makes itself known through the "unconscious" as well as the "conscious" aspects of the mind. As such, it might be referred to as "a larger intelligence" (John Wellwood) operating within us which has intention and purpose, and which can even be seen as discernable goals of the universe: self expansion, self completion, self repair, and self consciousness.

Thinking of consciousness this way, I am in the familiar realm of religious ideas where I feel more confident of the meanings. I am reminded of the part of Hindu mythology which says that Vishnu (the creative aspect of the godhead) is having this dream of which we are all dream persons. We are part of a larger intelligence. But it goes on to say that if we were to do the prescribed religious practices, we would "awaken" to realize that we are not really dream persons at all, but rather Vishnu having this dream. We would then be identified with our true essence as that larger intelligence itself.

It is in such "awakening" that we would become aware of the absurdity of much of our striving against others. When the trance of the dream is broken, it is difficult to remain caught in the melodrama of our lives. Although the "dream" of our lives goes on, and we must as dream persons continue to relate to other dream persons, a shift would take place in our sense of who we are. We then move into a much larger context suggested by the image, an experience we have regularly as we move from the dream state to our normal waking state each morning. And as the shift in our consciousness of who we are takes place, our sense of how we are related to others changes.

We begin relating to our lives and to others differently, just as we relate to our dreams and the persons in them differently when we awake from dreaming in the morning. The state of "awakening" is marked by a sense of lightness, just as waking from a bad dream can bring great relief. But probably because the "dream" of our lives does not disappear the way night dreams do, but seems to go on in tandem with our understanding of ourselves as the dreamer, "awakening" does not lead to disregard of others as irrelevant. "Awakening" simply diminishes one's fear and striving for self gain and induces a sense of compassion for others, especially for those still caught and suffering in the melodrama of the dream. So the sense of connectedness with others is also heightened using this metaphor.

It seems to me this Hindu myth is symbolizing the same kind of thing Harville is saying about consciousness, but in a much different way. It may not be making the points Harville wishes to make, but the myth acts as a kind of meta-theory of the way things are, and understanding it creates a different perception and experience of what is happening in human relations, and guidance for how one interacts with others. It recommends meditation as the tool for actualizing it in one's life, and offers no hope of "awakening" without it, just as

Imago therapy recommends commitment to the dialogue process as the road to "awakening". Harville will have to say if he means something radically different.

But I wonder if Harville's theory has to be scientifically validated, or whether we can simply accept it as a vision of the way things are that ties together in a more helpful way what we see, facilitating our work and relationships? It seems to me that if we want scientific validation, we must struggle with those who have been working on a science of consciousness for some time, people like John Eccles, Daniel Dennett, Paul and Patricia Churchland, Roger Penrose, John Searle, Gilbert Ryle, Owen Flanagan, George Rey, and many, many others. I think it is not professional to simply adopt as our truth the views of those we can more readily understand because we resonate with them as "spiritually" oriented persons. I really like the sacred visions of human life presented by Harville, Matthew Fox, and Ken Wilbur which address the challenges of living in ordinary intimate relationships. But I have heard too many claims of "scientific" validation for some very strange "new age" positions to feel comfortable with using references to quantum physics as a way of giving legitimacy to what may be essentially a "non-verifiable" religious orientation. To gain that kind of legitimacy would require, in my mind, that we make the struggle with those working on a science of consciousness to know that our position adequately deals with the questions these other orientations raise.

Meanwhile, believing that conscious pulsating energy is the stuff of which we are all made, and that we are connected with all creation as the same conscious pulsating energy, does shape my work and personal interactions. Such an orientation puts relationships in a much larger context. And the myth that I am Vishnu having this dream in which I appear as a dream person also has its impact. It reminds me of how badly we seem to be caught in the "dream" of our lives.

But here is the limitation I feel with both metaphors. The impact of both of these orientations is felt only when I can remember them. By far the most common experience I have of my consciousness (or is it unconsciousness) is that it comes wrapped in different mental or emotional packages which I would call ego states. I have come to learn that I move from one of these states to another almost imperceptibly. Some last longer than others, but I rarely seem to notice that I have passed from one mental or emotional state to another until much later. And I seem to identify each one as the on-going, self-same "me", even though, when I stop to analyze them, these states can be radically different from each other. So I realize how much of the time I spend in the "dream", and to think of myself as primarily conscious or rational seems a serious and morbid illusion.

Both Harville's and the Hindu vision of who we essentially are provides a much needed perspective on what we are about. But the thinking about consciousness that seems most relevant to me is pointed up by the Hindu myth. Although I like thinking of consciousness as the essence of my being that connects me to all that is, to be honest, for the most part my consciousness is not intentional or rational, but driven and irrational. I have the consciousness of the dream person, without much of the objectivity suggested by the role of the dreamer. So it may actually be misleading to regard my essence as consciousness without some equal emphasis on where I seem to be stuck. I know we focus on reactivity in Imago therapy, and how that comes from "old brain" patterns of defense, but I think there is much we must learn about it to be of help in the nitty-gritty of relationship struggles.

Having acknowledged that I mostly operate in an unconscious way, I also know I exhibit some level of consciousness. Sometimes I am able to identify being triggered into some emotional state, but usually not until I am already well into it. I seem to be on automatic pilot most of the time, following repetitive patterns of feelings, behavior and thinking. And this appears to be true of others as I observe them. The behaviorists confirm how predictable we are, undermining our vaunted notions of being rational, conscious beings exercising our freedom. They document how we seem to be in a waking trance. We are at the mercy of our stimulus-input. While we think of ourselves as being so rational and in control, we are often lost in our thought patterns or we are easily high-jacked by our emotions into psychological spaces and patterned reactions. We are creatures of habit, simply going from one routine to another, all the time with the illusion we are thinking, rational beings. In accord with the myth, it seems clear to me that we live in a dream world, and all the time regarding ourselves as awake.

Scientists who study the brain point out that our emotional reactions, passions, and longings have been imprinted on our psyche for the purpose of survival in situations that have been repeated countless times through countless generations in our evolution as a species. Our emotional reactions have been wise guides for us in our four million year history, just as they still are for other animals. They say the finishing touches were put on our brains about 40 thousand years ago. That means that they are adapted to a world that is radically different from the one in which we live today. We have, over the last few thousand years, developed cultures, civilizations, and domesticated relationships that have very different adaptation requirements. And we now change our environment more in 5 years than our ancestors did in thousands of years. We have constructed such a different world from that for which our mental and emotional apparatus was adapted, that we are constantly reminded that we are in danger of destroying our civilized way of living and even annihilating ourselves. Our emotions now need to be domesticated so that our passions do not overwhelm our reason. And this is true as much for our intimate relationships as it is for our international relations and ecological concerns.

Scientists tell us that our brains are geared for adaptation and survival, not rationality and analysis. Despite our large cortex, only 1 or 2% of it is engaged in rationality at any given time. It is mostly engaged with things like monitoring blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, muscle coordination, and internal and external dangers. So it is more like a liver than a thinking apparatus.

Designed to keep us alive with regard to our external environment, our brains make quick and dirty assessments of situations. We often don't have time to consider all the information available and to deliberate alternative responses, ie, to be rational. To keep us from harm, our brains are designed to jump to conclusions, and we react. We ask questions later. Our brains were not designed to be rational as we like to believe we are. Becoming cognitive is a particularly recent development in human history, and we as individuals have not yet found a way to successfully integrate that into our lives to slow down our reactivity. Our mental functions simply borrow old routines developed for ancient tasks to handle the radically new situations of modern life.

Our emotions are part of that reactive assessment pattern. Although they have been wise guides in the past, when triggered they hijack the mind and behavior to cope with the situation at hand. They are automatic, and activate what the brain has learned to be survival reactions which may now be far from adaptive. What we know as characterological defenses

are only the latest and personal layer onto this set of learned responses that shape our behavior and thinking. The survival reactions are largely by a pack of programmed routines, or what one investigator has called "a squad of simpletons" (Robert Ornstein, The Evolution of Consciousness).

These simpletons act without appeal to, or review by, our cognitive ability. Each has its own emotions, memories, priorities, apprehensions, and action patterns. Each is a self contained ego state. Each is isolated from other ego states, uncoordinated with them, and operates with restricted information. Each is complete in itself, but without awareness of or ability to take into account responses made in other ego states, and with information necessary only to deal with certain situations. They shift on and off stage unnoticed. But we seldom notice these shifts, because we nourish the illusion we are a rational, unified self.

So the question arises, "who's minding the store?" It turns out that the self is simply another simpleton. The self is simply another routine activated when we become aware of ourselves, which, because that happens so seldom, is a pretty weak routine. Mostly we are at the mercy of our stimulus input and our automatic reactions as our brains try to adapt. The "rational" self is consulted only when the simpletons are unable to solve a problem. And that is the trance of everyday life, going from one routine after another, with even our cognitive patterns being automatic, and no one minding the store.

The self as the rational and reflective part of us that enables us to be conscious and intentional is very weak. But to strengthen it and its ability to monitor and direct the other simpletons is the seemingly impossible task set for us if we are going to not just make our relationships work, but to survive as a species. Waking up and exercising our consciousness is really hard to do.