

CULTIVATING CONSCIOUSNESS: AN EAST-WEST JOURNEY by K. Ramakrishna Rao et al.
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This is a complex and informative book and it is impossible to do it justice in just a few pages. Suffice to say it is worth reading by anyone who is interested in exploring consciousness, if only for the final four chapters by Ramakrishna Rao who outlines the Yogic, Vedic and Buddhist viewpoints and then summarises the East-West correspondences and differences.

This is of great importance because in the West we often muddle our use of the terms mind and conscious-ness and make a divide between mind and matter. In the East mind is a different concept from consciousness and in some philosophies mind is material. This leads to a completely different approach to consciousness. For example, in the West the term unconscious can sometimes mean a complete lack of consciousness and sometimes mean mental information of which one is not aware. In the East the unconscious is one aspect of consciousness, with differing meanings depending on the philosophy.

This book is a revised and expanded edition of the original which was published in 1992. The expanded part is the Eastern perspective written by Rao as Part II of the book, and which are revised versions of chapters from his book *Consciousness Studies*, which was published in 2002, and the final chapter is a revised version of a paper published in the *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. The chapters in Part I are from a conference on “Cultivating Consciousness,” held in Durham, NC, in 1991, where the various articles were first presented. Thus we need to be aware that these papers were written more than 20 years ago and so the concepts and information are no longer quite so new! This, of course, is especially pertinent for the bibliography.

The introduction is by Ramakrishna Rao, in which he outlines the work by Louisa Rhine and emphasizes how any study of consciousness has to incorporate findings from parapsychology and spontaneous psychic experi-ences.

Part I: Western Models

Western Philosophical Models

Amongst others, the Institute of Noetic Science provided a grant for this conference, and Willis Harman contributes the first chapter, discussing the need for a reassessment of the metaphysical foundations of Western science. He considers these foundations to be objectivism, positivism, and reductionism, which are the underlying assumptions of logical empiricism and are based on the assumption of separateness. He considers this needs to be rectified by a more holistic science, which he calls a “Wholeness Science,” with interdependence as its foundation.

Stephen Braude responds to Harman’s talk. He considers that Harman fails to identify the most serious errors of mechanism. Instead of “wholism” Braude advocates a scientific pluralism, which recognizes that different scientific disciplines require different methodologies and perspectives, not one single theory to cover everything, but a “community of equals” (p. 42).

Thomas Hurley continues the theme of the metaphysical foundations of modern science and the problems,

such as reductionism, associated with them. He then identifies several themes that he considers to be emerging and that may help shift our worldview. These include the study of complex systems, purpose and self-determination, holistic concepts, and qualitative approaches.

David Griffin is the first to specifically address the western philosophical view of consciousness and the problems surrounding these western concepts. The first problem he identifies is that some Western philosophers even question the existence of consciousness!! Their reasoning results from the familiar Western mind-body problem stemming from Descartes. Griffin takes Whitehead's definition "that consciousness is the subjective form of an intellectual feeling, which arises, if at all, only in the late phase of a moment of experience" (p. 57). Next he discusses the Western difficulty in ascribing downward causation or any power to consciousness, and he brings the concept of pan-experientialism as the philosophy that enables this. Throughout all of this he conflates mind with consciousness and states that consciousness is a "virtually non-efficacious by-product of the mind" (p.66). For Griffin, mind is the most extensive, and his definition of consciousness is that of awareness, since he considers the unconscious to be nonconscious. This is diametrically opposed to the Eastern perspective.

Jean Burns brings parapsychology more specifically into focus, though it has been mentioned in previous chapters. She discusses characteristics associated with the mind-brain interface that incorporate psi into the theorizing, and models of consciousness in which psi is discussed. Many of these incorporate quantum mechanics in some form or other into their hypotheses, whilst her model is a thermodynamic one.

Neil Rossman defines consciousness as varieties of awareness that are displayed by various creatures in a developmental manner that expands as consciousness becomes reflective self-consciousness, and humans develop a sense of self.

Western Psychological Models

Eugene Taylor addresses the problems that Western physical concepts of consciousness have with altered and psychic states of consciousness and with Eastern spiritual concepts of consciousness. He discusses various states of awareness experienced whilst in a sensory deprivation chamber, and suggests that the split between Western and Eastern concepts is due to the West always dealing with the external world whilst the East is more concerned with inner states.

The next chapter is by Ramakrishna Rao, who looks at conceptual and methodological issues. His definition of consciousness is that it is both a state of awareness as well as awareness of something. Added to this are varying levels of subliminality vs. liminality and explicit vs. implicit. He then mentions various Western philosophers and their concepts of consciousness.

Beverly Rubik discusses consciousness in relation to "subtle realms," such as bioelectromagnetics, and argues for greater gender balance in future research, a softer yin-based approach.

Robert Jahn introduces the idea of the complementarity of consciousness, as in Neils Bohr's concept of complementarity, a sort of both/and dimension of consciousness.

Charles Tart explicates his model for transpersonal psychology based on computer generated virtual reality. Dreams are our normal every night virtual reality, and he suggests that our everyday experience is a virtual reality.

Some Research Topics

Rather than talking about consciousness per se, Brenda Dunne gives us a brief insight into some of the PEAR REG work and from this suggests support for a complementarity principle in consciousness previously outlined by Jahn.

In the context of the role of wholistic healing within western philosophy, Michael Grosso considers the power of imagination in healing, such as cultural psychosomatic disease and healing forms of consciousness.

Alfred Alschuler considers the experience of inner voices in people, such as saints, political leaders, clairvoyants, and the role they have played in human culture. Commonly they are transcendent experiences that people relate to union with the divine or an inner teacher.

The chapter by Srinivasan presents the first Eastern perspective on the topic and discusses the nature of re-

ality from the worldview of an ever-changing universe that is coexistent with a background of unchanging reality. In this model evolution proceeds from the changeless to everything, including mind, in the present time-space material universe. Some Indian philosophers equate the unchanging reality background with pure Consciousness.

The final chapter in Part I is by United States Senator Claiborne Pell. He makes a plea for more research into survival of bodily death.

As can be seen from these extremely brief reviews of highly complex topics, the Western views of mind and consciousness span a huge range with no two people addressing either the same issues or having the same understanding of mind and consciousness.

Part II: Eastern Perspectives

In Part II, which comprises one third of the book, Ramakrishna Rao first presents the Yogic philosophy of consciousness. Although a Yogic scholar may well find his brief explanation inadequate, for me, as a Westerner who is unfamiliar with the finer details of this philosophy, I found it very clearly written and a most interesting view contrasting with the various Western concepts discussed in Part I. Yoga philosophy is linked with the *Samkhya* philosophy, considered to be the oldest philosophy in India. It essentially espouses two basic principles in the universe, *prakrti* (matter) and *purusa* (pure consciousness, which is the foundation for awareness and is different from mind, although there are no direct translations of the Sanskrit words). Both are primary and irreducible principles, all-pervading and ubiquitous. Evolution is the actualization of these potential principles. When the two become entangled, then the conscious mind is formed. Mind is the interface partaking in consciousness and in the material world. Yogic philosophy distinguishes three aspects of mind. The central processor (*manas*) aspect of mind assimilates the sense perceptions, which are then related to the ego (*ahamkara*). This is the aspect of mind being researched by neuroscience. This is then transformed into awareness by the psyche (*buddhi*), which enables consciousness of the object by virtue of its association with *purusa*. The consciousness of *purusa* is reflected on *buddhi*. When this final stage does not occur, we have unconscious cognitive states (*samskaras*). This philosophy enables psi to have an essential place within the worldview. “Time and space are categories created by the mind to organize and understand sensory information. *Buddhi* itself exists beyond the constraints of space and time” (p. 243). Thus, awareness is of two sorts—transcendental (mystical, intuitive) and phenomenal (the material world), which enables eight different states of consciousness, one of which (the anomalous) is related to psi awareness.

Even more interesting is the next chapter, in which Rao compares and contrasts the Yogic philosophy with that of *Advaita Vedanta*, the philosophy of *Shankara*. This philosophy brings in the concept of *Atman*, or pure consciousness, which is self-manifesting and self-illuminating, contentless, formless, nonintentional, not limited by time and space, both subject and object, undifferentiated, knowledge itself, and “rests in no other” (p. 261). *Atman* becomes the personal consciousness in the form of *jiva* which is consciousness limited by the mind and body. As in Yogic philosophy, mind is considered to be the subtlest form of matter, bridging consciousness and matter. Within personal consciousness there are four cognitive states: waking, dream, deep sleep, and *samadhi*. Rao discusses the ramifications of this philosophy and starts to build a much bigger picture of the sophistication and understanding of the Eastern traditions. It is commonplace to state that in the West we have explored outer knowledge whilst in the East they have explored inner space, and this is brought out clearly in this chapter. Reading these Indian philosophies makes me feel that we Westerners really are in nursery school insofar as the concept of consciousness is concerned.

Rao then brings Buddhist philosophy into the pot. He explains consciousness from the viewpoint of Theravada Buddhism, which has a complex phenomenological psychology of consciousness, very different from the Tibetan traditions with which I am more familiar. In Buddhism, the mind is composed of momentary states of consciousness that are constantly arising and dissolving, much as a flame or a river is constantly changing in a ceaseless becoming of dependent origination. Theravada Buddhism is more of a psychology than a philosophy, aiming at an understanding of the nature of consciousness, which is a relationship between subject and object. From these relationships, Buddhism has identified 89 states of consciousness, such as the sense domain, the domain of thinking, reflection, concentration, and the transpersonal plane. Our consciousness is a dynamic process with both subliminal and supraliminal components; the subliminal component is called *bhavanga* and is a key concept, similar in many

ways to *buddhi* in Yogic philosophy. Further, consciousness is considered to contain 52 basic elements, such as feeling, volition, perception, attention, which combine to create variations in consciousness. Our perceptions are coloured by our conditioning and occur as a process involving six steps, which can vary, thus leading to changes in our experience. Rao then briefly mentions the later Buddhist Mahayana philosophies and compares Buddhist philosophy with *Vedanta* and Yoga.

And finally Rao compares Western and Eastern concepts in his summing-up chapter. He notes the wide variety of concepts covered by the Western authors and suggests that the one commonality is that all conceive of consciousness in some way connected with awareness. He then gives a brief review of the history of Western philosophy and psychology of consciousness, and a review of the Indian philosophies. He concludes by describing the two approaches as complementary, the West emphasizing the phenomenal and the East the transcendental. Both are important.

I do not necessarily think that in the West we should adopt any of the Eastern philosophies, but I think it is really useful to understand their perspectives, because I think that it helps to clarify the dreadful muddle we have in the West and, from this clarity, perhaps advances can be made in our understanding of consciousness.

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