

Being Human in a Conscious Universe

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Introduction

In this lecture I want to present two metaphysical assertions about what is ultimately real:

1. The universe is fundamentally alive, not dead. Consciousness, or mind, is present “all the way down” to fundamental units of reality; it is not limited to certain life forms with big brains and nervous systems.
2. The universe as a whole, including everything in it, is one living being. What various mystical traditions call God, Brahman, Allah, the Buddha Nature, Yodh Hey Wuw Hey, the Tao, Wakan Tanka and many other names is the consciousness, or mind, of the universe as a whole. And the physical aspect of the world is the body of God.

In order to present these assertions, I need first to define what I mean by the terms “consciousness” and “mind.”

What is Consciousness?

I am a philosopher, someone who thinks about how we think in order to think better. As a philosopher, I don't like the term “consciousness.” It is terribly misused. The term has many meanings, and people employing it don't usually make clear what meaning they are using; instead they simply assume that others know what they are talking

about. A great danger of this approach is that you can use the same term in different senses and thereby assert things that actually make no sense.

I prefer to speak of being conscious rather than of consciousness. “Consciousness” is a noun and as such suggests that its referent is a thing. But there is no such *thing* as consciousness. Consciousness is not a thing, it is a process. I prefer to say “being conscious,” to suggest that our conscious life is full of events. It is full of things as well, but the way those things are presented to us constantly changes. We are conscious beings, but we don’t *have* consciousness. What we have is the world presented to us, parts of it bright and vivid, parts of it dim and obscure, parts of it in complete shadow, and always changing.

We can say, if we need to use the word, that consciousness is the state of being conscious or the capacity to be conscious. But then what does “conscious” mean? Here are some definitions:¹

- “Conscious” can mean simply *being awake*. Humorously we can say that consciousness is that annoying interlude between naps.
- “Conscious” can mean being aware of something. In this sense, “consciousness” is *ordinary experience*, which is always experience *of* something, such as people, trees, books, food – all the things around us – or of subjective things such as bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc., These things are the contents of consciousness.

In our ordinary experience we focus on some of the contents, and others are present more dimly, in the periphery. I like to use the term “aware” to mean having experience in general, both vivid and dim, and reserve the term “conscious” to mean having experience of something sharply in focus. We can be dimly aware of all kinds of things that we do not pay attention to. Notice the sensation of your buttocks and legs pressing against your chair. Until I called attention to it, you were not conscious of that sensation, but were only aware of it dimly. When we pay attention to something, then we are not only aware of it, we are conscious of it. (This is just the way I use the terms “aware” and “conscious.”)

However – and here is where the definition of the term gets slippery – sometimes the term “consciousness” means the container, that which holds or includes the content, and sometimes it means the content itself, what we are conscious of. Consider phrases such as “It was not in my consciousness ...” and “expanding one’s consciousness” The metaphor is that consciousness contains something else, and if consciousness is expanded it can contain more things or perhaps the same things more intensely.

The psychologist William James lists several characteristics of consciousness.² I’m going to read a few of them one at a time. In each one, try substituting the phrase “the content of experience” for the term “consciousness.” Then try substituting “the container.” See which one makes more sense.

¹ Zeman, *Consciousness, A User’s Guide*, p. 15,

² *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

- Consciousness is stable for short periods of time, up to a few seconds; but it changes over longer periods of time. [Content]
- Consciousness is selective, with a foreground and a background, and a limited capacity. [Container, that which has capacity. But also content, in that foreground and background are contents.]
- Attention can be directed, one can shift the focus of consciousness. [Container. The container focuses on some of the contents to the exclusion of others.]
- Consciousness is aspectual, with a limited point of view, conditioned by the perspective of one's viewpoint. [Container]

There is an unavoidable ambiguity here because you can't have the contents without the container, and vice versa. You can't be conscious without being conscious of something. And in order for the something to be there for you, you have to be conscious of it. When you hear the word "consciousness," be sure to determine whether the meaning is content or container.

- Yet another meaning of the term "consciousness" is *mind* or a person's subjective, interior aspect. In this sense you are conscious of anything that passes through your mind, and the term "conscious" means "*knowing*."³

When I say that the universe is conscious, I mean it in this sense. Everything in the universe has a subjective or mental aspect, an aspect of mind, as well as a physical aspect, an aspect of body. I'll return to this point shortly. Before I do, there are a couple of other meanings of the term "consciousness," which I will mention just for the sake of completeness.

- It can mean the way you interpret your world in a global sense, particularly politically. Marxists talk about "bourgeois consciousness" or "proletarian consciousness," meaning how people think about economic or political events or their place in the social order. In this sense "consciousness" is like a filter or a colored lens on the container. You pay more attention to certain contents than to others without realizing that you are doing so.
- The term may be used to refer to a conscious being such as a person or even a deity: "He could sense a consciousness somewhere in the distance" or "a vast consciousness watching over us." This is figurative speech, using a part to represent the whole.
- And finally, the adjective "conscious" sometimes refers to a particular piece of the contents. If we say "a conscious thought," we do not mean that the thought is aware of something else. We mean that a person who is awake and cognizant of their surroundings has the thought.

So there are lots of meanings of the terms "conscious" and "consciousness." Instead of using "consciousness," I like to use the term "experience" to denote the totality of all

³ Ibid., p. 21.

that is presented to us in our subjectivity (the contents) or our subjectivity itself (the container). Experience includes a rich field of sensation, emotions and thoughts, some of which fall under the spotlight of attention, and some of which don't.⁴ Experience is the subjective aspect of a person's taking into account his or her world.

Subjective and Objective

And this brings up an important distinction, the one between “subjective” and “objective.” By *subjective* I mean detectable or observable in principle by only one person, the one who is taking into account his or her world. By *objective* I mean detectable or observable by more than one person. What is subjective is observable or detectable only by one person, not because it happens that nobody else is observing, but because they can't observe it no matter how hard they try. You can't feel my itch. Everything that is in a similar position – the particular shade of red that I perceive, the particular quality of well-being or discomfort that I feel – is subjective. What we can all agree on – that something is red rather than yellow, for instance – is objective.

Everybody think of an animal. Turn to the person next to you. Can you tell what animal they are thinking of? Or even if they are following the directions and thinking of an animal at all? No, nor can they tell what animal you are thinking of. Now observe the color of their shirt or blouse. Can you tell what color it is? Can you and your neighbor agree on what color it is? Yes, of course. That's the difference between what is subjective and what is objective. Only you know what is subjective to you. Only your neighbor knows what is subjective to him or her. But you both know what is objective.

A Conscious Universe

The reason I am harping on subjectivity and objectivity is that it is at the basis of a view of the reality known as *panpsychism*. The word comes from the Greek *pan*, meaning “throughout” or “everywhere,” and *psyche*, meaning “soul” or “spirit” or “mind.”⁵ “Psyche” does not refer to soul in the sense of a supernatural or disembodied entity; it means our subjective, mental life. Our word “psychology,” the study of mind, comes from the same Greek root. The theory of panpsychism says that everything, not just we humans, has a subjective aspect as well as an objective aspect. In other words, everything is in some way aware of its surroundings.

Panpsychism is an ontological thesis, a theory of the ultimate nature of what is real. (The term “ontology” means the study of being, from the Greek *ontos*, being or that which exists, and *logos*, study.) In particular panpsychism is an answer to the “mind-body” problem, the problem of how mental things, which have no extension or location in space and are entirely subjective, are related to physical things, which are located and extended in space and are observable objectively. Other such theories are materialism, the view that only physical things are ultimately real; idealism, the view that only mental things are ultimately real; and dualism, the view that matter and

⁴ Pinker, Steven, *How the Mind Works*, pp. 134-148.

⁵ Wikipedia, “Panpsychism.”

mind are two distinct categories of reality. Of all these ontological theses, panpsychism is the most coherent.

The idea that everything has an aspect of *psyche* or mind to it, seems nutty to most people. In our everyday experience some things are alive and some aren't, and the difference is obvious even if there are some grey areas. Living things have minds. At least we ourselves do, as we know from direct experience, and it is not too much of a stretch to say that all living things do. But what sense does it make to say that dead things have minds?

The answer is found in the process metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th century mathematician and philosopher. Whitehead claims that reality is best understood as processes rather than things, that the fundamental character of all that exists is change and that enduring objects are persisting patterns amid change, much like the flame of a candle. The process view has been present in European thought from the time of the Greeks. Heraclitus used the metaphor of a river, which remains what it is by changing what it contains. Change is a necessary condition for constancy; without it we would have only lifeless uniformity and would not even know it, because knowing itself is a temporal process.

Whitehead's idea is that reality is made up of momentary events, not particles. This is not an intuitive idea, and his major work, *Process and Reality*, is dense and highly technical, over 500 pages long. It is a bit presumptuous of me to do so, but I'll try to summarize it briefly. These events, which Whitehead calls "actual occasions" are a bit like subatomic particles, with some important differences:

- Each actual occasion is momentary, coming into being, going through various phases and then passing away.
- The final phase of an actual occasion is not fully determined by the beginning. There is room for novelty, for the possibility of something new coming into being.
- Each actual occasion is aware. In a primordial way it experiences its past and its present surroundings. Whitehead calls it an "occasion of experience."



Figure 1 - Actual Occasion

(Figure 1 is meant to convey a burst of something coming into being, and, through the eye, being aware of its surroundings, although an actual occasion's mode of awareness is probably not like our sense of sight. Whitehead calls it "prehension," which suggests something tactile.⁶)

- What we think of as a particle is actually a series or stream of these actual occasions. A single electron is a series of momentary electron-occasions that form an enduring object much as the momentary frames of a movie form a continuous moving picture.

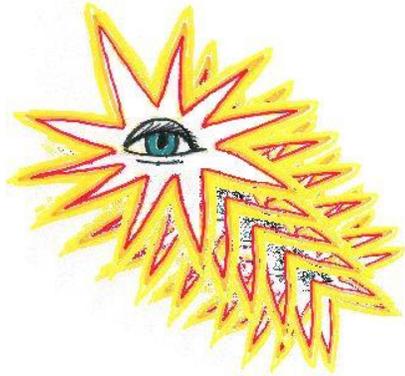


Figure 2 - Stream of Actual Occasions

(Figure 2 illustrates a particle persisting through time as a stream of actual occasions. Whitehead calls such a stream a "society."⁷)

- Nonliving things are composed of particles, streams of actual occasions, each of whose primordial experience stays confined to the particle itself.
- Living things, such as plants, animals and human beings, are composed of streams of actual occasions whose primordial experiences bind together and reinforce each other, giving birth to a higher-level experience. The richest and most intricate example we know of is our own conscious experience.

This is panpsychism. According to Whitehead, the smallest quantum event is a moment of experience. The event comes into being by incorporating aspects of its surroundings and its past into itself by means of processes akin to the full-blown conscious experience that we know as perception. All of reality has a private experiential aspect, which I call *interiority*, as well as a publicly observable physical aspect, exteriority.

Actual occasions cohere into temporal strands that appear to us as elementary particles. Particles cohere into molecules, and molecules cohere into objects and living cells. Nonliving objects lack the unified coherence of interiority, built up of the interiority of their constituents, that living cells have. Objects are just substances. Cells cohere into organs and living beings.

⁶ Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

Panpsychism does not assert that rocks have psyches in the same way that humans do. That would be ridiculous, as rocks exhibit none of the complex behavior of humans. What panpsychism does say is that the components of rocks at the subatomic level are sequences of events that take into account their surroundings in a manner analogous to human experience, albeit in a much more primitive fashion.

The point is, rather than assuming that life mysteriously emerges when brute matter becomes organized in sufficient complexity and that consciousness emerges when it becomes even more complex, we can assume that a primitive form of experience is present at every level of reality. We do not need unverifiable suppositions about which animals are conscious and which are not, nor do we have to puzzle over how mere complexity of matter gives rise to consciousness. Reality is a continuum, all aspects of which have some degree of mentality as well as physicality.

Instead of modeling our experience on things, process metaphysics models things on our experience.

Living and Non-Living

So imagine that you are a tiny particle, a succession of occasions of experience. (To do so is totally anthropomorphic, of course, but that's OK because panpsychism says that very tiny primitive elements are like us, in a way. They experience their world – sort of as we do, but much less elaborately – so we can imagine how it might feel to be one of them.) How would you maintain your existence, your continuity over time? There are two basic strategies.

One strategy is to keep doing the same thing repeatedly in the company of vast numbers of your peers also doing the same thing. You are a succession of events, coming into being and passing away, and each time you come into being you do what you did before. You just do the same thing over and over again, and it is the same thing that all your neighboring particles do. That's what inert stuff, like rock or concrete, is. It just keeps on being what it is, doing what it does. It doesn't change; change comes only from an impact from outside.

The other strategy, the strategy of living beings, is to maintain a form while the material in that form constantly changes. The physical matter that comprises living things is constantly changing through *metabolism*, the process by which matter is ingested, transformed and excreted. Metabolism is the ability of an organism to maintain its structure through time by exchanging physical matter with its environment.

What persists is not the matter itself but the form in which that matter is organized. The physical matter changes, but the organizational form doesn't. (Or, it does, but it evolves so there is a continuity.) A single slice of time does not encompass the unity of the living being at all. Only across time can we grasp its functional wholeness.⁸ The structure of the material aspect – a changing material process that has a unity of form over time – gives rise to a unity of experience over time, a macro-experience, which is

⁸ Jonas, "Evolution and Freedom," pp. 64-67.

of a higher order than the micro-experiences of the constituent elements. (“Macro” means large, and “micro” means tiny.)

We do not have to imagine how such a living macro-experience feels, because we already know. Our subjective life *is* such a macro-experience. Our sense of our own unity across time, the sense that each of us is the same person now that we were yesterday and the day before, is the internal, experiential aspect of the continuity over time of our complex physical body.

But, to return to the thought experiment, imagine yourself as a particle within that form. You are a particle, and you do what you do, but in so doing you align yourself with a larger pattern and with patterns within patterns, patterns that can be seen or comprehended in their entirety only from a higher, more inclusive viewpoint.

Such inclusivity extends up and down the hierarchy of complexity. Consider a liver, say, or a stomach or an ear or an eye or a finger. Each of these organs is composed of cells which are in turn composed of molecules, which are composed of atoms, which are composed of subatomic elements, which are streams of actual occasions coming into being and passing away. And each organ is an element in a larger organism and lives only because it is a part of a living organism.

Imagine yourself as an organ. You do what you do, but you have a sense of being surrounded by something living, something pulsating and vital. You have a sense of being part of a greater whole. Remember that thought, as I will return to it shortly.

The Universe as Unity

From here I am going to go one step further. In addition to everything having a mind as well as a body, I am going to say that all the minds are consolidated into one mind. I cover this idea in more detail in my book, *How To Be An Excellent Human*, and I am skipping over a lot of things that are in the book to make the idea plausible. Here I am just going to jump right into it.

One of the earliest of our world’s great mystical writings is the set of ancient Indian treatises called *Upanishads*. The Upanishads say that Atman, the Transcendental Self⁹ of each one of us and (by virtue of the doctrine of Panpsychism) of every living thing and every elemental component of nonliving things, is the same as Brahman, the universal Self of the entire universe: “This Self is Brahman indeed” say the scriptures.¹⁰ Brahman is the supreme reality, which I call The One, The All or The God. The God is that which is conscious of and which animates everything from the inside.

This universal Self is known by many names in many different spiritual traditions: Brahman, the Void, the One, God, the All, the Spirit-that-moves-in-all-things, the Tao

⁹ The Transcendental Self that which experiences all the various objects or contents that are present to us, both subjective and objective. See Chapter 9 of my *How To Be An Excellent Human*.

¹⁰ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, IV, iv, 5, in Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, p. 71. See also Mandukya Upanishad, 2, in Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, p. 201.

and many more. I prefer to say “The God” instead of just “God” to emphasize the unique singularity of this being. Lots of people have an idea of “God,” but I don’t want to get mixed up with lots of people’s ideas. If I say “The God,” I hope it will be unfamiliar enough to make you stop and think rather than assume that I am talking about your concept.

The God is the subjectivity of everything, the universal mind. This insight is expressed in the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 13, verses 1 and 2, in which Krishna, The God, speaks to Arjuna, a human:

- 1 *This body, Arjuna, is called the field. He who knows this is called the knower of the field.*
- 2 *Know that I am the knower in all the fields of my creation.*¹¹

The God looks out through our eyes, hears through our ears, feels through our fingers and skin, smells through our nose and tastes through our tongue. (By “our” I mean each of us, individually.) The God thinks through our mind, feels through our emotions, and actualizes intentions through our will.

This process is rather like divine telepathy. Picture an octopus with an eye on the end of each tentacle. Each eye corresponds to a self. Imagine being at the end of a tentacle, looking out of the eye. That is, figuratively speaking, the condition of a separate self, looking out at the world. Now imagine being in the center of the octopus, being able to see out of all the eyes. That is, figuratively speaking, the condition of a higher-level coherence of interiority, a higher-level self, which we might term a god with a lowercase “g” or a spirit. We get an inkling of this condition when we see a whole flock of birds or a herd of animals turn and move as one; it is as if the flock or herd is one being, animated by one soul. Now picture a super-octopus, which is composed of all the separate octopi. This super-octopus can see through all the eyes of all the octopi. Viewed from the outside, this super-octopus is the universe, the entirety of all that exists. Viewed from the inside, it is The God, with an uppercase “G.”¹²



Figure 3 - Selves within selves

This metaphor is visual, but we could just as well use an auditory or a tactile one. The point is, regardless of which metaphor we choose, a self such as you or I is conscious of the world (from the outside) and of itself (from the inside), and a god (lower-case

¹¹ *The Bhagavad Gita*, tr. Mascaro, p. 99.

¹² (Illustration) Grey, Alex, *Ophanic Eyelash*.

“g”) would be conscious of many selves from the inside. The God is that which is conscious of all selves from the inside.

The God is that which “peers through the eyes,” so to speak, of every individual self: animal, vegetable or mineral. Each individual self sees (or hears, or feels, etc.) the inside of itself and the outside of things in its surroundings. The God, being the knower in every field, as the Bhagavad Gita says, experiences the inside of every self and the outside of everything of which each self is aware. Together they constitute the whole of reality. Therefore The God knows (is aware of) everything.

Mystical philosophy, such as that found in the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita, as well as in some Sufi writings, has emphasized the conscious, knowing aspect of The God. However, The God is not only that which knows, but also that which acts, the source of activity in every being. The God is not only conscious, but animating. We could call it Spirit. A spirit, as we perceive it from the outside, is a locus of animation. From the inside it is a point of view. The God is the Spirit-that-moves-in-all-things.

The God is that in every being from which activity emerges. From the inside, we experience that some of our activities arise from within us, not as a result of something from the outside, but spontaneously, of our own doing. Some of our activities are things that we do, our actions.¹³ The God is the source of all actions in every self. The God is the Self in all selves, animating all beings.

Here is a picture showing hierarchical levels or degrees of interiority, which we might call selfhood or soulness:

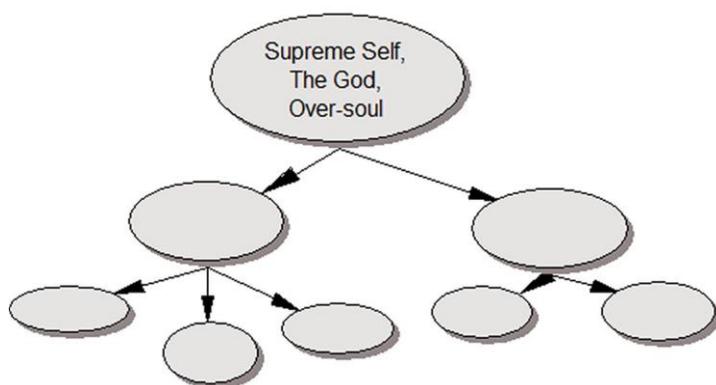


Figure 4 - Hierarchy of Interiority

The term “over-soul” is Ralph Waldo Emerson’s translation of the Sanskrit term *Paramatman*, Supreme Self or Supreme Soul.¹⁴ In this picture the topmost oval represents the cosmic mind, the universal intelligence that I have been talking about. The smallest ovals at the bottom represent individuals such as human beings, and the intermediate ovals represent larger coherences of interiority, such as the spirit of a

¹³ The term “activities” includes activities caused from outside of oneself and activities caused by oneself. I use the term “actions” to mean activities caused by oneself. Actions are a subset of activities.

¹⁴ Emerson, “Essays, First Series [1841]: “The Over-Soul.”

place or time or community in which one can participate, or spirit beings such as angels or gods. Or, since the whole thing is fractal in nature, the intermediary ovals can represent human beings, and the lowest-level ovals can represent organs or cells.

The idea that there are intermediary levels of soul above the human is my own speculation. Of course, this discussion is all speculation, as there is no objective, third-party evidence for any of it. But it does not contradict objective, third-party findings either. It is, like all metaphysical theories, a conceptual framework within which to interpret the totality of our experience, including objective, scientific fact and subjective, private, personal fact.

So What?

If this notion of an over-soul uniting all our individual minds is true, it explains or at least makes plausible seemingly spooky things like intuition, mind reading, remote viewing, spirit guidance and other so-called paranormal events. If we are all part of a vast cosmic mind, then under certain circumstances we should be able to tap into the knowledge of that mind. We should be able to know or sense things that are not apparent to our individual minds, but are known by the cosmic mind or by other individuals united in the cosmic mind. And that cosmic mind, being made up not only of the minds of living beings but also the micro-minds of the particles that make up non-living things, would know everything.

We should also be able to influence the world by influencing the cosmic mind, which not only perceives but acts in the world. Indeed, one of the tricks I learned early in my training is how to secure a parking place for yourself before arriving somewhere. You put yourself into a trance-like state characterized externally by alpha brainwaves and then clearly visualize a space opening up just as you arrive. It works a lot of the time.

But getting a parking space is just a parlor trick compared to the real benefit of tapping into the cosmic mind: access to vast intelligence. We have the opportunity to get guidance from a Being who knows a whole lot more than we do. That is what the wisdom traditions of the world are all about. Through practices such as meditation, chanting, prayer, fasting, ritual, dance and others, we can still the chattering of our own individual minds and become receptive to what we can quite appropriately call divine wisdom.

And what is this divine wisdom likely to tell us? Well, what would you tell your liver if it were in a difficulty of some kind? We can't talk to our livers, but when we have a liver problem we do something to fix it. We go to a doctor or take medicine or change our diet or have an operation. We want the liver to function well, because when it functions well, we function well. Having a healthy liver helps us to be healthy.

In a similar way, The God, the Cosmic Mind, the All – whatever name you want to use – wants us to be healthy. The All, if we listen to it, tells us how to thrive and function well, because we are, as it were, organs in the largest organism of all, the entirety of all that is. Just as we are healthy and flourish when the organs of our body function in a healthy way, so the All is healthy and flourishes when we function in a healthy way. The All has our interest at heart and gives us good advice, if we only ask for it.

That we are organs in a bigger organism is an incomplete metaphor. Unlike the organs of our body, each of us is conscious. We each have the capacity to think, to know the world and to know our selves. Understanding our place in the universe as a conscious element in a larger conscious whole enables us to take an active part in promoting the wellness of the whole. The moral of the story is that we can become conscious participants in an upward spiral of more and more well-being, happiness and flourishing.

What we get from this world view is good advice about how to live our lives:

- Live as if you are part of a web of an organic whole, at the center of which is a vast locus of consciousness, an immense, all-encompassing intelligence.
- Work for the good, the healthy functioning, of the larger Being of which you are a part because doing so will enhance your wellbeing.
- Work for your own good, your own healthy functioning, in order to become more effective at working for the good of the whole.
- Ask for help from the All. You can't get better guidance than divine wisdom!

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Revision History

Version	Date	Author	Change
1	17 October 2013	Bill Meacham	First draft