

## Science, Consciousness and God

Peter Russell describes how science and spirituality are beginning to find a common ground, as the study of consciousness, matter and energy lead to an understanding of God.

by Peter Russell {mosgoogle}What has science to do with consciousness? Very little. Consciousness is a troublesome subject. It cannot be pinned down and measured as a material thing; and the uncertainties of subjective experience interfere with our efforts to arrive at universal truths. So science has, by and large, deliberately excluded consciousness from its considerations. What has science to do with God? Even less. Whereas we have to accept the existence of consciousness, bothersome as it may be, God has no place at all in the scientific world-view. Modern science has looked out into 'deep space' to the edges of the Universe; back into 'deep time' to the beginnings of creation; and down into 'deep structure' to the most basic constituents of matter. In each case it finds neither place nor need for God. The Universe, it proclaims, functions perfectly well without God. This has been the traditional view. But today things are changing. Old boundaries are dissolving, and science is beginning to expand its scope. The Super-Paradigm

When considering the limits of contemporary science, it is important to remember that we are talking of the current paradigm, not science as an endeavour. A scientific paradigm is the set of assumptions within which a particular science does its business. Quantum theory, Darwin's Theory of evolution and the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious mind are all examples of paradigms. Over time paradigms change. For nearly two thousand years Plato's belief in the perfection of circular motion dominated the science of mechanics. In the seventeenth century Newton's Laws of Motion became the paradigm. Today, Einstein's Theories of Relativity are regarded as a more accurate description of how matter moves in space and time. Unfortunately—as Thomas Kuhn showed in his masterful exposition, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*—paradigms do not change easily. They are so deeply embedded in the scientific and wider social culture that they are seldom questioned. Evidence that contradicts the current view is overlooked or rejected; or, if it cannot be so discarded, incorporated in some way, often clumsily, into the existing model. Believers in the old paradigm would rather die than give up their assumptions about the nature of reality. And they often do. New paradigms arise in a culture, not because people change their minds, but because the adherents to the old die out. The current scientific world-view holds that matter and physical energy are the primary reality. When we fully understand the functioning of the physical world, we will, according to this view, be able to explain everything—including the human mind. This is more than just a paradigm within a particular field of study; it is a belief common to almost every branch of science. It is more of a super-paradigm. To question this super-paradigm is to question something really big. Little wonder then that any evidence for telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, healing, prayer, or any other phenomenon that suggests consciousness is not so dependent on matter, is either ignored or ridiculed by the establishment. Within the accepted world-view, it simply cannot be true. What is consciousness? If, as the current super-paradigm holds, consciousness arises from matter, it is natural to ask when it first arose. Is an animal such as a dog conscious? As far as we know, dogs are not self-conscious as we are, they do not think to themselves in words, and they probably do not reason as we do. But does that mean they have no subjective experience, as Descartes conjectured? As far as I can tell, my dog experiences the world around. She clearly feels pain when hurt. And when asleep, she appears to dream, feet and toes twitching as if on the scent of some fantasy rabbit. To suggest that she is not conscious, but some insentient biological mechanism with no interior world, seems absurd—as absurd as suggesting that my neighbour across the street is not conscious. In dealing with such questions, it is helpful to distinguish between two broad but distinct senses of the term 'consciousness'. First, there are the various subjective phenomena and events that we experience—our perceptions of the world around, our thoughts, our ideas, our beliefs, our values, our feelings, our emotions, our hopes, our fears, our intuitions, our dreams and our fantasies. These I call 'the contents of consciousness'. Distinct from all of these is consciousness as a faculty: the faculty of having an inner mental world within which these experiences take place. The contents of our consciousness may vary widely—we see different things, think different thoughts, feel different emotions, hold different values—but common to us all is the fact that we are aware. Without this faculty there would be no subjective experience of any kind. We might draw an analogy with a painting. The picture corresponds to the contents of consciousness; the canvas on which it is painted corresponds to the faculty of consciousness. An infinite variety of pictures can be painted on the canvas; but whatever the pictures, they all share the fact that they are painted on a canvas. Without the canvas there would be no painting. Where dogs differ from us is not in the faculty of consciousness but in what they are conscious of—the contents of their consciousness. Dogs may not be self-aware, and may not think or reason as we do. In these respects they are less aware than we are. On the other hand, dogs can hear higher frequencies of sound than we do, and their sense of smell far surpasses our own. In terms of their sensory perception of the world around, dogs may be more aware than humans. Origins of Consciousness If dogs have the faculty of consciousness, then by the same argument so must cats, horses, deer, dolphins, whales and other mammals. If mammals are sentient beings, then I see no reason to suppose birds are any different. Some parrots I have known seem as conscious as dogs. And what about reptiles and fish? There is nothing particular about their nervous systems to suggest they do not have their own interior world of experience. So where do we draw the line? At vertebrates? Insects have senses and nervous systems; why shouldn't they also have some corresponding degree of inner experience? The picture that is painted on the canvas of their minds might be very different indeed from ours—less rich, much simpler—but I see no reason to doubt there is a picture. It seems probable to me that any organism that is sensitive in some way to its environment has a degree of interior experience. If a bacterium is sensitive to physical vibration, light intensity or heat, who are we to say it does not have a corresponding degree of consciousness? The picture that is painted might be the equivalent of an extremely faint smudge of colour—virtually nothing, compared to the richness and detail of human experience, but not completely non-

existent. How far down do we go? Would the same apply to viruses and DNA? Even to crystals and atoms? The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead argued that consciousness goes all the way down. He saw it as an intrinsic property of creation. From this perspective, what has emerged as life has evolved is not the faculty of consciousness but the various qualities and dimensions of conscious experience—the contents of consciousness. As living beings evolved eyes, ears and other sense organs, the pictures that were painted in consciousness became increasingly richer. To process and use this information nervous systems evolved, and as the nervous systems grew more complex new qualities emerged—free-will, cognition, intention and attention. With the appearance of human beings, consciousness gained an entirely new dimension—thinking.

**In Search of the Thinker** As we observed our own inner experience, we felt there must be an experiencer, a self who is having all these experiences, making all these decisions, and thinking these thoughts. We had used language to label just about everything else in our world of experience, so it seemed a natural step to give this self, whatever it was, a label. We called it ‘I’. But what was this self? What was it like? Where could it be? Scottish philosopher David Hume spent considerable time looking within, trying to find something that was his own true self. But all he found were various thoughts, sensations, images and feelings. The reason he never found the self was that he was looking in the wrong place; he was looking in the realm of experience, in the contents of consciousness. But the self, by definition, cannot be another content of consciousness. It is that which experiences the contents of consciousness. The only other possibility is that this sense of self has something to do with the faculty of consciousness itself. But if that is the self we are inwardly sensing, it is not an individual, personal self. It is not a self that has any characteristics or qualities. It is not something that can be perceived or known, as we perceive and know other things. It is not a unique self. It is something we all share. It is the canvas of the mind.

**A Faltering Self** Because the feeling of being a unique individual self is so compelling we keep searching for some phenomenal identity. We draw a sense of who we are from our thoughts and memories, from our bodies and our appearance, from what we do and what we have achieved. But such a self is forever at the mercy of events. So we put on all sorts of airs, buy no end of objects we don’t really need, and say all manner of things we don’t really mean—all in order to reinforce this derived sense of self. When this self is threatened it is likely to trigger fear. Fear is of great value if your physical self is being threatened. We would not last long without it. But it is not an appropriate response to a threat to an artificial psychological self. In this role, fear is compromising, not aiding our survival, and in several different ways. Fear can lead to stress, and thence to various physical, mental and emotional ailments. Fear that our sense of identity may be damaged leads us to judge the people we interact with, and live with. A mind that is judging is likely to be critical and attacking; it is not a mind that is compassionate and loving. Fear also leads to worry. We worry about what we did in the past; and we worry about what may happen to us in the future. But while our attention is caught up in the past or the future it is not in the present moment. Perhaps the saddest irony of all is that this worry prevents us from finding that which we are really seeking. At root we all want to feel good inside. Quite naturally, we want to avoid pain and suffering, and feel more at peace. But a mind that is busy worrying cannot be at peace. Other animals, not having language, not being able to think to themselves, not needing to reinforce an illusory sense of identity, do not feel these fears. They are probably at peace much more of the time.

**Transcending Language** There is, it would appear, a downside to language. Language is invaluable for sharing knowledge and experience—without it human culture would never have arisen. And thinking to ourselves in words can be very useful when we need to focus our attention, analyse a situation or make plans. But much of the remainder of our thinking is totally unnecessary. When I observe my own mind, I reckon that ninety per cent of my thinking I would better off without. If half my attention is taken up with the voice in my head, that half is not available for noticing other things. I don’t notice what is going on around me. I don’t hear the sounds of birds, the wind, or creaking trees. I don’t notice my emotions, or how my body feels. I am, in effect, only half-conscious. Just because we have the gift of being able to think in words does not mean that we have to do it all the time. This is something many spiritual teachings seem to have recognised. Most have techniques of meditation or prayer designed to quieten the voice in the head, and so still the mind. This is what the Indian word samadhi literally means, ‘a still mind’. When the mind is still it is able to be more in the present, and more at peace. It is the natural state of mind that is our evolutionary inheritance. It is the state of grace to which we long to return; from which we fell when language took over our consciousness. Moreover, say the sages, when the mind is completely still then we know our true identity. As the Chandogya Upanishad declared some three thousand years ago, "That which is the essence of all things, That art Thou."

**A Science of Consciousness?** Science has explored deep space, deep time and deep structure and found neither place nor need for God. Now that it has begun to consider consciousness, it has embarked upon a course that will eventually lead to the exploration of ‘deep mind’. In doing so it may ultimately be forced to open up to God. Not the idea of God found in contemporary religions—which have inevitably suffered distortion and loss as they were passed down from one generation to another, from one culture to another, and from one language to another—but the God that the teachings spoke of originally, the essence of our own selves, the essence of consciousness. Such a possibility is anathema to the current scientific super-paradigm. It is like Galileo telling the Vatican that the Earth is not the centre of the Universe. But if there is one certainty of science, it is that all certainties change with time. The scientific models of today are, in almost every area, radically different from those of two centuries ago. Who knows what the paradigms of the next millennium will look like? A science that included deep mind would be a truly unified science. Such a science would understand the root of all our unnecessary fears, understand why we do not live life to its fullest potential, why we are not at peace inside. The consequence of such a science would be the development of inner technologies that help us quieten the mind and transcend our fears. It would be a science that helps us become masters rather than victims of our thinking, so that we can live with this accident of evolution, prosper from its benefits, but not let it so fill our minds that we lose awareness of other aspects of our reality—including our true inner nature. Now doesn’t that seem a worthwhile enterprise?

Peter Russell, one of the leading figures in the Human Potential movement, is fellow of the Institute of Noetic Sciences, the World Business Academy, the Findhorn Foundation and an honorary member of the Club of Budapest. His books include *The Awakening Earth*, *Waking Up in Time* and most recently *The Consciousness Revolution* (with Stanislov Grof and Ervin Laszlo). Ken Wilber calls him 'one of the very finest minds of our time'; His website is [www.peterussell.com](http://www.peterussell.com)