

## The Posthuman Conception of Consciousness: A 10-point Guide.

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*I argue we now exist in an era that could be called Posthumanist as we move away from the Humanist era with its tendency towards reductionism and materialism. This move is necessitated by a more subtle and complex understanding of reality made possible, in part, by the ability of new technology to help us model deeper levels of reality. This paper provides an overview of the Posthuman conception of consciousness, language and culture. Despite the inherent complexity of the subject, I hope to demonstrate that the basic principles can be grasped through consideration of the following ten points.*

*Posthuman, Artificial Intelligence, Brain, Culture, Language, Buddhism, Consciousness, Energy, Fragmentation, Phenomenology.*

It is clear that we are now experiencing social, technical and economic change at an historically unprecedented rate. Elsewhere I have described how I perceive the consequent shift in understanding as the *Posthuman Condition* (Pepperell 1995). There are several things that distinguish the Humanist era we are leaving from the Posthumanist era we are entering. Humanists, for example, regarded *Homo sapiens* as the highest point of evolution. We are now aware that machines, bio-machines or genetically altered organisms with different, or superior, characteristics may supersede humans as we currently know them (Moravec 1988). One of the major concerns of posthuman theory is the way we might now think about consciousness, especially given the possibility that intelligence could emerge in non-human substrates. Whilst consciousness is inevitably a subject of considerable complexity and abstraction, I nevertheless believe it is possible to say some useful things about it. Here then are ten ideas that, collectively, outline the posthuman conception of consciousness.

1. *Consciousness is not restricted to the brain.* Virtually all researchers, philosophers and psychologists I have encountered in the field of consciousness studies assume that consciousness occurs in the brain (e.g. Searle 1984). Whilst I don't deny that the structure and operation of the brain plays a significant part in creating conscious activity, it cannot do it on its own. The reasons are simple and obvious — separate the body from the brain and consciousness ceases. No-one has yet demonstrated that a brain can think without being attached to the body. The belief that it can exist independently is often expounded in the 'brain in a vat' fallacy. This proposes that an isolated brain, artificially fed the same impulses as an *in situ* brain, would be conscious in the same way as the *in situ* brain. The proposition is false because it is not the brain in itself that is conscious, but the whole system of which it is a part. *Consciousness is the function of an organism, not an organ.*
2. *The human body is not separate from its environment.* Since the boundary between the world and ourselves consists of permeable membranes that allow energy and matter to flow in and out, there can be no definite point at which our bodies begin or end. *Humans are identifiable, but not definable.* Things around us, like food, air, light, smells and sounds are absorbed into our system, become part of us and are expelled. How can we define precisely what it, or isn't, part of us. The notion that each of us is a discrete entity

can be called the 'boxed body' fallacy. This assumes that the human body has a fixed delimitation; the mind resides inside the brain, inside the walls of the box whilst the reality upon which mind reflects lies outside. The box is perforated to allow sensations to flow in and waste to flow out. According to this model, each side of the box is discrete and retains its own identity. Philosophers then argue about the relationship between the two sides — Can one really know what's outside the box from the limited data we receive? If not, where does that data come from, etc? All such questions are avoided if we simply accept the continuity between body and environment— dispense with the box! *Nothing can be external to a human because the extent of a human cannot be fixed.*

3. *Consciousness, body and environment are all continuous.* It follows from the previous two points that there is a continuity between the 'thinking being', the tissues in which the thoughts are manifest, and the world in which those thoughts and tissues exist. Just as the brain needs the body to create conscious activity, so the body needs the environment to create conscious activity. A body without an environment, like a brain without a body, ceases to function — consciousness stops. Not only does this mean that the environment is connected directly to our consciousness through the body, it also means that consciousness is connected directly to the environment — ultimately they cannot be separated. By a process of simple reasoning, using orthodox scientific facts, we have demonstrated that the phenomenon of consciousness is distributed throughout reality and not localised in the brain, or in part of the brain. Such a position is consistent with systems of thought that previously evolved outside Western Europe, namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. Although there are many differing strands within each tradition, there is a common acceptance of the continuity between mind, body and world and a consequence belief that consciousness pervades all reality (Watts 1950).
4. *Consciousness emerges from specific conditions.* Imagine a kettle used to boil water. It consists of a vessel to contain the water, a heating element, electrical energy, a certain atmospheric pressure, gravity and the water itself. If you put all these things together in the right way you can, within a few minutes, produce the effect known as 'boiling'. But, where is 'boiling'? It cannot be specified, isolated or confined to any part of that system. Boiling is a property that emerges from a specific set of conditions. The same is true of consciousness. Given the right combination of genes, tissues, nutrients, chemicals and environmental conditions the property we know as 'consciousness' emerges. We cannot precisely define what this quality is, where it occurs or how it might look in isolation from those conditions — *it is a consequence of all those conditions*. As with the kettle, if you remove any of the constituents the emergent quality evaporates.
5. *Everything is energy.* It would be consistent with what is understood about reality at the sub-atomic level to say that the smallest 'particles' known are actually fields of energy rather than 'solid' material (Davies & Gribbin 1991). Therefore, it is plausible to think of everything in the known Universe as energy in various states of manifestation and transformation. Again, such a view would be in harmony with the world-view of those Eastern traditions already mentioned as well as some early Greek thinkers like Heraclitus and Thales. The *appearance* of solid matter around us is a consequence of the way our perceptual apparatus apprehends the forms that energy takes — rocks, plants, sea, stars, etc. The illusion of separation between things results from a combination of:
  - The various manifestations and transformations of energy and,
  - The ways in which our sensory apparatus respond to the manifestations and transformations of energy.

6. *No things exist as separate things in themselves.* Although we are apparently surrounded by an infinite number of objects, shapes, colours, smells and sounds it is a mistake to believe that they are each intrinsically distinct from each other, a notion that many physicists accept (Bohm 1980). It is clear that we are sensitive to certain structures or differences and become aware of them as 'things' in as much as they display difference from other 'things' around them. This does not mean that they are 'in-themselves' different, only that we perceive them to be so. For, although they may *appear* as separate, we construe such separations for our own convenience. In other words, the distinctions are arbitrary and contingent: *arbitrary* because, on close examination, the boundaries are always fuzzy and *contingent* because, depending on context or viewing position, the boundaries can move. Because we divide the world up into things in our own minds, we then impose those divisions onto the world, as though they were always there. Then we say, "We've discovered something!"
7. *Language divides us.* Humans have evolved a massively complex and sophisticated verbal facility. It passes to each successive generation, acquired by individuals mainly during the first five years of their development. Language operates by a process of *fragmentation*. That is, it conceptually breaks the world up into different 'things', each of which it refers to with discrete words. Thus, we tend to see the world in the way that we describe it, as a fragmented collection of 'things' rather than as a continuous whole. Perhaps the most significant distinction that language reinforces is the fragmentation between oneself and the rest of the world, thereby giving rise to the "I" or Self by which one is distinguished from everything else.
8. *Language is not all of reality, but part of it.* The distinctions we make between things in the world, including the one between ourselves and the world, are illusory in as much as they arise through language. Nevertheless, they are still part of the reality we experience and are powerfully persuasive in creating the nature of that experience. The distinctions are real, inasmuch as they produce what we consciously experience, but they do not constitute, or account for, the whole of reality. Many philosophers (Plato, Kant, Hegel and Schopenhauer for example) have made the distinction between 'knowable' and 'unknowable' reality. In Kantian (and Phenomenological) terminology the distinction is made between the *phenomenon* (knowable to the senses) and the *noumenon* (unknowable to the senses). The posthuman conception of consciousness, by contrast, does not accept that such a distinction has any intrinsic value, except in as much as it is a product of fragmented human thought. For the posthuman, all of reality includes our thoughts about reality which are part of a continuous *phenomenon*.
9. *Consciousness is the sum of all the distinctions we make through language.* The phenomenon we normally describe as 'consciousness', that is the everyday awareness of Self through which we verbally articulate our presence in the world, emerges through linguistic evolution. The sum of accumulated distinctions we impose upon reality generates a complex web of oppositions that we can endlessly recombine orally, imaginatively, poetically, artistically, and so on. This is what distinguishes human (linguistic) consciousness from other types, e.g. that of animals. There are certainly other types of awareness of existence that bypass or transcend this fragmented, linguistic kind. They are referred to by a variety of names — preconscious, unconscious, Samadhi, dreaming, intuition, instinct, and are mainly distinguished from everyday consciousness by their lack of verbal expression. It is through these types of non-verbal awareness we are able to 'know' aspects of reality that elude literal articulation and, hence, how we repair the rupture between 'knowable' and 'unknowable' reality. There are a number of techniques that can be employed to evoke these alternative states of conscious being and

transcend the fragmented linguistic consciousness. Examples are hypnosis, ritual, relaxation, drugs, mediation and koans (Cleary 1989).

10. *Culture is a way of de-fragmenting consciousness.* Although the human language faculty is a very powerful tool for understanding and controlling aspects of reality, it does produce a distorted view of the world. As we have said, that view is necessarily *fragmentary*. The problem with a fragmented view is that it gives rise to all sorts of contradictions, oppositions, isolations and conflicts that we then try to resolve by reuniting the fragments — a process we could call *defragmentation*. Having experienced the relative bliss of an un-fragmented consciousness before birth and the acquisition of language, it might be that we wish to return to that ideal, defragmented state which is sometimes called "Pure Existence" (Sekida 1985). This is a state free from the anxieties and contradictions that linguistic consciousness produces. In addition to transcending fragmented consciousness through techniques already mentioned above, we have evolved ways of *defragmenting* it. This means drawing together connections between differing concepts and perceptions of reality to create a more unified experience of it — to create a sense of order. Examples would include instances of art, music, cinema, poetry, literature, mathematics and philosophy. Using devices of narrative, representation, temporal structuring, metaphor, logic and pattern each of these cultural forms presents disparate facts of existence as conceptually continuous. These practices can all be regarded as attempts to wrest a more coherent, unified discourse about reality from the confusion of fragmented consciousness.

## Conclusion

The posthuman conception of consciousness resists the division and separation of reality into fragments of the kind often generated through Humanist approaches to modelling reality. Whilst we struggle to adopt this way of thinking at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we are reminded of the relevance, simplicity and coherence of much older thought systems that could provide guidance. Despite the power of language to 'divide and conquer' reality we are often left confused and alienated about our position in the world because of the inherently fragmented state of linguistic consciousness. Various cultural practices provide us with temporary release from this anxiety either by drawing connections between disparate fragments, or by transcending fragmented consciousness entirely.

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