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THE HARD PROBLEM

MAURICE BLOCH

Soul dust: the magic of consciousness **BY NICHOLAS HUMPHREY**

This is an extraordinary book as it attempts to explain all the most distinctive things about human beings in a few hundred pages. It is written by a swashbuckling character who clearly does not hesitate to take up the most daring challenges. Perhaps such characterisation will be enough to put off the majority of social and cultural anthropologists who have grown weary of grand generalisations about our species made by scholars from the natural sciences who have very little understanding of why our subject has abandoned making such grandiose pronouncements. So often these proposals seem mere repeats of older theories which have subsequently been found wanting for reasons of which their new advocates are unaware. At least in this case such condemnation would be somewhat unfair as it is clear that the author is well acquainted with what many anthropologists write and have written and he is not unsympathetic as so many natural scientists are. Another reason why anthropologists might reject this book out of hand is less admirable; it may simply be a manifestation of the sad theoretical timidity which has recently characterised much of the subject.

Whatever the causes for reluctance, such dismissal would be a pity. The book is written in a fun manner which will both delight and annoy but will never bore. I believe the discussion it contains, or at least parts of it, can prove excitingly thought provoking to all practitioners of social and cultural anthropology. What I therefore say to my anthropological colleagues is: "Prepare to be infuriated but read the book all the same".

Darwinian evolutionary theory frames the thesis. The argument is about the vexed question of the nature of human consciousness and what it implies. It thus attempts to explain the least obviously *useful* aspects of human beings as adaptations which account for their presence and survival. This however is not the usual ignorant reductionist stuff that we have all come to fear.



Probably explaining or describing consciousness is a task that most anthropologists consider to be beyond them but this is also the case for many scholars who come from disciplines such as philosophy, psychology or neurology and who might have been expected to have a go at telling us what consciousness is and even perhaps how it has come about. Indeed, many have recently attempted theories concerning the nature of consciousness.

Nonetheless the most well known scholars who write on the subject seem more intent on recommending to others that they should not waste their time on such difficult questions. For example Nagel told us that we are such a long way from even understanding what we are talking about that we should not even start and Searle believed he had explained why any naturalist account of consciousness is impossible. Although Humphrey reiterates some of these pessimistic arguments he nonetheless believes that his evolutionary approach can overcome them.

Some of what he tells us is new, some of what he tells he has told us before, and some ideas are borrowed from others and these are always scrupulously acknowledged. As a starting point he defines consciousness not so much analytically as by giving us an evolutionary history of human consciousness which somehow makes the traditional despair about the subject less oppressive. First of all there was sensation which involved an automatic reaction to the environment on the part of the organism. Such reaction is widely shared in the living world as even plants react to what they come in contact with. Then there is a further step which involves what he calls sentition, that is the quasi centralisation of knowledge of the interaction with the outside world on the part of the organism. With sentition when a brick drops on your toe the pain is created in the brain even though we believe it is located in the foot. This looping and re-representation of the interaction with the world in the central nervous system where it is interpreted as entity occurring at the locus of interaction is for Humphrey the essential first step towards proper consciousness. This involves seeing oneself as if from the outside, as an actor on some sort of stage that one is watching. Such a formulation of the "Cartesian theatre" has often been criticised, in particular by Humphrey's one time co-author Daniel Dennett, but he carries on regardless. For the "observed actor" to be created, various sentitions have to be united so that the full conscious self can be realised. A key element for the possibility of this creation is what Humphrey, following others, calls the thickening of time. The point is that the present has no durability and so the mind has to give a degree of illusory stability to the representation of its interaction with the outside world before this can become an object of, and for, reflection.

At this stage, and before looking somewhat more critically at what the argument involves, it is worth pausing to reflect why a discussion of the hard question of what is consciousness is at all important for the anthropologist or the ethnographer. The reason, I would argue, is simply this: if ethnographers, in Malinowski's famous phrase, attempt to communicate "the native's point of view" we need to be somewhat clear about what it is to have "a point of view". Discussions of this fundamental question are, as far as I know, rare or non-existent in social or cultural anthropology. What is that phenomenon that we are trying to convey? Is it what the people studied express or are we talking about something much less explicit but more fundamental; people's consciousness of themselves in an environment which includes others assumed to be conscious. If that is the case anthropologists cannot avoid the hard question. We are thrown back on the problem of what consciousness is and of what it is to be aware of one self or to be a person in the world. Furthermore, since anthropologists are not professional writers of autobiographies we need to reflect on how we can possibly access other people's consciousness or selves or persons etc. For such a reflection, and as a warning of the difficulties involved, anthropologists will benefit from a book such as this. In any case, as they read on, they will soon feel more at home since the discussion of the

nature of consciousness is rapidly followed by an exploration into areas with which anthropologists and ethnographers are more familiar.

Humphrey's characterisation of consciousness as a theatre which represents oneself to oneself as an actor among other actors leads him to endorse a view which has been discussed by a number of cognitive psychologists such as Paul Bloom and anthropologists such as Rita Astuti and Alfred Gell: that humans are natural mind/body dualists. This, argues Humphrey, is because the creation of oneself for oneself, which evolution has produced in humans, creates the mind as a represented entity distinct from the body. This, he tells us, can be given the more familiar label of the "soul". Probably the choice of this word is intended in part to provocatively horrify Humphrey's psychological colleagues who will not have completely forgotten the behaviourists' denunciations of the "ghost in the machine", but it also enables him to link his discussion to other literatures less often present in technical discussions concerning the mind in cognitive science. Anthropologists may be pleased or appalled by Humphrey's nod of approval to Tylor's animist theories, which, although a little revived in recent ethnographic literature, seem fairly dead in their original form. Not so here but there are more surprises in Humphrey's catholic embrace. References to Tylor and Marilyn Strathern are accompanied by the evocation of poets such as Gerald Manley Hopkins, Coleridge or Philip Larkin, artists such as Kandinsky and writers such as Galsworthy and A.A. Milne. These, it must be admitted, do not often find themselves in the company of Jerry Fodor, Lionel Penrose, V.S. Ramachandran or F.J. Odling-Smee.

This talk about "soul" and quotations from poems is not a question of mere added frills intended to seduce the non specialist reader so that they pick up a book that might, from the outside, be believed to be an austere contribution to cognitive science. Poetry, literature and even ethnography form the core of the argument of the book. According to Humphrey the emergence of human consciousness has forced human beings to reflect philosophically and artistically on the meaning of their lives and of the soul and at the same time to create imaginative systems. A simplified version of Humphrey's story would go something like the following. With an objectified representation of the self/soul as an exterior object came the realisation that one will die. This fact is so depressing that there would be little reason not to commit suicide on the spot. However, consciousness has enabled us to enjoy life and beauty and to create all sorts of ideas about these things; hence poetry and literature. It has enabled us to place our lives in social systems within which we distribute ourselves and thus project our distributed selves in systems which overcome the limits of individual lives and give us a feeling of some sort of immortality. Consciousness has, in this way, given us the potential to create mental and material environments which encourage us not to give up and to reproduce our genes and ensure that our offsprings, or the offsprings of close relatives, will reach maturity so that they too will reproduce. Beliefs in the soul, beauty and literature increase our Darwinian fitness!

All this remains a little vague but the idea is obviously quite attractive. Those of us who enjoy poetry (Humphrey quotes two of my favourite poems), music, philosophy and video games should not anymore be ashamed of wasting our evolutionary potential in pointless and therefore evolutionarily harmful side lines which, if they should take ever more time and energy, would lead to the end of our species, rather like bread and circuses are said to have led to the collapse of the Roman empire. John Milton, Woody Allen, Rainer Maria Rilke and David Hume, not to mention the makers of Star Wars, are all doing, or have done, their bit for increasing the prospects of our DNA. We need not consider their work as mere frivolity; it is all about contributing to the evolutionary process. Religion, of which evolutionary inclined scientists tend to disapprove, is really part and parcel of the general human adaptation to

enjoy beauty and to overcome death; hence it is right for Darwinist Humphrey to employ the word soul and to like social and cultural anthropology and poetry.

Nonetheless I personally suspect that all this good will, light and beauty may be somewhat misleading and this for a reason which has to do with an aspect of the original problem of the definition of consciousness. The poets, philosophers, and theologians summoned by Humphrey are all, if I may misquote Wordsworth, recollecting about consciousness in tranquillity. The authors quoted are trying to evoke what they feel is somehow there, but which they also acknowledge, like some of the cognitive scientists, they find nearly impossible to reach. They thus produce meta discourses as distant from their target as metaphysics is to physics. In any case their purpose in producing these works or in creating and organising religion is quite different to that of the blind watchmaker. We may accept that consciousness and an instinctive dualism leads humans to create and operate complex social and cultural systems but this does not mean that the theories and institutions produced in this way offer transparent guides to the nature of the psychological or social phenomena in themselves. I believe anthropologists have often mistaken occasional narratives, which may be produced by poets, artists and philosophers, as well as by their informants, to be accounts of the normally implicit business of being a conscious actor in a world of conscious actors. The production of such narratives is motivated by quite different intentions and for different purposes. I am not sure that these types of activities have a direct relation to the flow of consciousness as it occurs in our mental and social life, or that they can directly guide us towards their evolutionary implications. Theoreticians of consciousness, as Humphrey notes, find pinning down what is involved terribly hard, partly because it is so difficult to consciously imagine what it is to be without consciousness and partly because whatever *it* is, is so totally implicit. The ready made answers of artists and religion make the problem seem much too easy by providing quick, beautiful but shallow answers. I rather doubt these are helpful in advancing our understanding of the hard problem of consciousness.