

# In the Beginning Was Consciousness

The Harvard Dudleian Lecture for 2003–04

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May 1, 2003

My lecture title may sound somewhat strange, but I chose it on purpose. I believe that we are, at the present moment, at the cusp of the curve of life—what the French call *cours de vie*—of the paradigm that has dominated Western civilization since the Renaissance. And this transformation that is coming about has at its heart this question.

It was about fifty years ago, right on this campus, when with Thomas Kuhn, a major American philosopher of science and an old friend, and a few others, we were grappling with this question of paradigm shifts. He and I did not exactly agree on what the shift was or what we meant by paradigm, but we both felt that a major change was afoot. Of course, these things do not happen quickly, as he himself pointed out in his important writings. It takes some time, but I do believe that this is a time when the questions faced by present-day civilizations involve not only solutions within the present parameters within which people think, but also those parameters themselves—that is, the paradigm within which human beings carry out their intellectual and also practical activities.

So, I speak about “in the beginning was consciousness.” In fact, the original title I had thought up for my lecture was “In the Beginning Is Consciousness”—reality here and now. Let me begin by quoting from several of the sacred scriptures of the world. In the Rig Veda, the oldest of all Hindu sacred scriptures, we read, “One alone is the dawn beaming over all this, it is the One that severally becomes all this.” The one is *Sat*, *Chit*, and *Ananda*—that is, the three states of being (*Sat*), blessedness, bliss (*Ananda*), and, of course, consciousness (*Chit*).

We find the same idea in the *Tao Te Ching*, the primary text of Taoism, which also influenced Neo-Confucianism. The nameless *Tao* is the beginning of heaven and earth, and the same *Tao* is the mother of the 10,000 things. So at the origin of the universe you have the *Tao*, which in fact is also consciousness.

And, of course, we all know the opening of the Book of John: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In chapter 6 of the Book of John, Christ says, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” So this Word is not simply word in the ordinary sense, but it is the spirit and life; it is consciousness.

Finally, in the Qur’an, in chapter 36, the surah *Yāsīn*, it is said, “But His command when He intendeth a thing is only that He sayeth unto it, ‘Be’ and it is.” So the origin is very explicitly stated in the Qur’an to be the command of God, who is the knower (*al-‘Alīm*) and is supreme consciousness.

When we turn to traditional philosophies all over the world, we see this almost remarkable unanimity in this matter. We think of the point beyond all forms and numbers associated with the *Lambda* of Pythagoras, or of Plato's *to Agathon* (his name for that aspect of the Divine otherwise called the Unmanifest or First Logos), or Aristotle's Divine Intellect. We can think of the *esse* of St. Thomas Aquinas, which is also consciousness, which is the origin of all things and knows all beings, and corresponds to *wujūd* in Islamic philosophy, as St. Thomas Aquinas knew well. And outside of the circle of Western Asia, Europe, and the Abrahamic world, we can turn to *Ātman* in Hindu metaphysics, which is pure consciousness, the Self, which is the origin of all things, and also the role of *Tao*, and the Neo-Confucian philosophies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. One can go on and on providing examples.

So where is the exception to the view of consciousness being the origin of things? The exception happens to be found in the world in which we are living. Before modern times, there were philosophies for which consciousness was not primary and "in the beginning." We see it in the Greco-Roman antiquity; we also see it in certain schools of Hinduism, but these views were minor and marginal. They did not dominate the worldview of the civilizations in question. Furthermore, in all traditional civilizations, there was a mentality in which "in the beginning" did not imply only a beginning in time somewhere back there but also a metahistorical truth. That is very important. It is very significant that while in English we say, "In the beginning was the Word," in the Latin Vulgate it says, *In principio erat verbum*. So "in principle" was the Word, and not only temporally. These other civilizations were fully aware of this truth. The reality of the primacy of consciousness begins in modern times at the end of the Renaissance, especially with the Scientific Revolution.

Before I go further, however, it is important, if we are going to be philosophically serious, to define what we mean by "consciousness." There are those who believe that philosophy should only deal with what is operationally definable, that the word *veritas* should be removed from the concern of the philosophy department because it cannot be defined from the point of operational methods that are used in analytical philosophy.

But there are universal concepts of philosophy to which I am appealing—the traditional and the time-honored schools of philosophy—which also are very rigorous, but not necessarily rationalistically. This is because it is impossible to define consciousness operationally. Every time you try to define consciousness operationally, you have to make use of consciousness in order to do so. It is like the famous saying of Pascal, who said that one cannot define "to be," because every time one uses a sentence to define it, one says, "that is, it is, etc.," and one is therefore already using the verb "to be" in order to define being. One then has a circular argument, and this is not logically acceptable.

It is a paradox that something as obvious as consciousness cannot be externally and operationally defined. That is true. But we all know what consciousness is innately, because to know itself involves consciousness. Through a way of deluding ourselves of being the only reality, we might deny the world out there, or, through some kind of sophism, try to deny the reality of the consciousness that is making the statement about the world out there. In both cases, it is through the use of consciousness that we make a truth claim, a claim to know. Consciousness is, therefore, the most primary reality through which we know and judge every other reality.

Consciousness, for traditional civilizations, for religions and traditional philosophies, is not only a state. It is a substance and not a process. It is something, like Being itself, which at its highest level of reality is at once luminous and numinous. Consciousness at its elevated level is at once knowing and knowing that it knows, knowledgeable of its own knowledge. It is at once the source of all sentience, of all experience, and beyond all experience of the knowledge that something is being experienced. That is why even the more skeptical philosophers have had a great deal of trouble negating it, even those who have been skeptics from a religious point of view.

We have the supreme example of skepticism in the famous Cartesian method. Descartes was, I think, wrong in many ways, but he was right in one thing. And that is: You can doubt everything, but you cannot doubt the fact that you are doubting. And from this affirmation, of course, comes the famous *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes, “I think, therefore I am.” What follows from the “therefore” is unfortunate, because the “therefore” has other more essential consequences. Descartes should have said, “I think, therefore God is,” or “Consciousness is,” but he did not do so. Nevertheless, the fact remains that even if you negate everything, if you doubt everything, you cannot doubt the instrument by which you are doubting.

This idea did not begin with Descartes. The great Persian philosopher Ibn Sīnā, or Avicenna, over a thousand years ago talked about the hanging man. A man hangs in the middle of space so his feet do not touch anything; his hands do not touch anything. He does not know where he is. He can doubt the existence of the earth. He can doubt the existence of the air. There is nothing that he cannot doubt. The only thing he cannot doubt is himself, who is doubting other things. So, in fact, Descartes’s argument is not the beginning of this concept in the history of philosophy. Even the skeptical philosophers in days of old did not deny the primacy of consciousness. The question was, “What mode of consciousness?” “What kind of consciousness?”

I want to get back now to the significance of consciousness metaphysically, and the consequences of the denial of its primacy, for our life, religiously and otherwise. As I have said elsewhere, I believe that it was really with the Scientific Revolution that “in the beginning was consciousness” was seriously challenged. At first it was not challenged outwardly by those who were the great masters who created modern science. Certainly, not by Johannes Kepler and Sir Isaac Newton, both of whom had even a mystical view of religion and the belief not only in God but also in a kind of mystical vision of God, each in his own way. And even Galileo the maverick could not imagine denying that God created the world. But that is not really the point.

Once having established this new worldview in which God becomes at best only the creator of the world, two issues arise. First, the levels of consciousness are all, in a sense, reduced to a single level. That is, the multileveled structure of the world of consciousness, which you had traditionally, from the Divine Consciousness, to the consciousness of the angels, of the great intellects, of the great saints, and sages all the way to the consciousness of ordinary human beings, not to speak of animals, was all reduced to a single level of reality. And people spoke of consciousness in the world as being confined to ordinary human consciousness.

The second consequence, which is even more devastating from the point of view of our discussion here, is that it is true that it was accepted by most of the architects of

the Scientific Revolution that God created the world, and that God had consciousness, because he knew—he is the “knower,” and that he has all the other attributes related to the attribute of consciousness. But after creating the world he had nothing further to do with it. In other words, “in the beginning” was understood only temporally. This is the deistic position, which came to the fore for a long time, and remained so, replacing the theistic position of William Paley and other natural theists. Natural theology came to be considered to be, in fact, an oxymoron, not having any real significance and meaning, even religiously. What lasted much longer was the deism within whose framework many people still think to a large extent.

During the last forty years we have heard constantly about the Big Bang theory. Lectures have been held on how it is related to the perspective of the book of Genesis, or the Qur’an, and the Abrahamic vision of a creator God. But the consciousness of God within his creation is irrelevant, because once the Big Bang has taken place, and the universe is here, one is no longer seen as being interested in any consciousness in the universe, and in fact the predominant scientism denies such a reality. One speaks only of energies and material particles. So consciousness is taken out of God’s creation. That is what resulted from the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution, and henceforth consciousness became an epiphenomenon in the universe limited to the human state. It was through this mechanical view of the universe, complemented by the Darwinian theory of evolution in the nineteenth century, that the category of consciousness essentially became irrelevant in the cosmos according to the new scientific paradigm. It became irrelevant, even if many still believe, that God created the heavens and the earth. It became irrelevant as far as science and our situation in the world—that scientism is so dominant today even among many people who call themselves religious—are concerned.

And it is this denial of the primacy of consciousness that led finally to the idea of always trying to explain by reduction. This reductionist outlook is one of the most important characteristics of modern thought: explanation through analysis and reduction but rarely through synthesis and integration. That is, the whole is never seen to be greater than its parts, and therefore in explaining the cosmos we are always after ultimate particles. Long ago, a well-known physicist thought that within five years we would discover all of the ultimate particles of matter. Fifty years later, we are still looking for the ultimate particles of “matter.” Because of metaphysical reasons, it is not just a question of discovering a few billiard balls that happen to be very small and we just have not found the smaller ones whose discovery is around the corner. Just put material particles together and create the universe. And yet we hold on to this idea, and continue to deny higher rules of existence and the truth that “in the beginning was consciousness.”

One example is found at the doctor’s office. We are reduced to what the MRI shows, and our chart, but the rest of us does not count. We are reduced to our biological aspect, and the biological aspect to chemistry, the chemistry to physics, and so forth. This is reductionism at work in our personal lives. It is only recently, in fact, that Harvard University has started a spirituality and healing program at the Medical School, because at least some medical doctors have come to realize all too well that our consciousness does affect our body in remarkable ways, even if we cannot explain it according to the prevalent paradigm.

In the realm of quantum mechanics, paradoxically, we have to accept the reality of

consciousness, because we cannot ever know anything without observing it. That is why some physicists now talk about psychons, but most physicists have not accepted such an idea. The idea that we have psychic “particles,” consciousness “entities” or “fields,” along with neurons and all the other particles that are around is itself a way of trying to come to terms with consciousness. We have ended up with the paradox that we cannot really understand the universe quantum-mechanically without a consciousness to observe the quantum.

The reality of consciousness has grabbed us once again and will not let us go. And the remarkable thing is that when we come to the end of this period of the gradual dissolution of the Renaissance seventeenth-century paradigm, the reality of consciousness enters the scene again.

Hinduism, to cite a non-Western example, is the antipode of this seventeenth-century view, for in the Hindu view everything is a level of consciousness. For example, a stone’s being is a form of stony consciousness, as it were. In Hinduism, this is perfectly understandable, but in our terms, such an assertion is not understandable. The same holds true up the line, all the way to the level of human beings. In contrast to Hindu doctrines and ideas coming from other religions and philosophies of the East, in the prevalent scientific worldview the ontological reality of consciousness is negated from everything in the world, except for some human beings, including ordinary believers in God. But in this paradigm, whether one believes in God or not is irrelevant to the situation of human beings in the world, as far as the significance of consciousness is concerned.

This banishing of consciousness from the cosmos, denying that “in the beginning was consciousness” (and also, in principle, *is* consciousness at the present moment) has had very deep consequences for the human state, for what we are suffering through and experiencing today. Let us not forget that the scientific theory posits that consciousness is an epiphenomenon in the cosmos, possessed by an insignificant species living on a very irrelevant planet, in a minor solar system and galaxy, a species some of whose members happen to be able to claim that human consciousness is irrelevant. But no one talks about how we happen to be able to make this claim. Our consciousness is not considered to be a major reality in the cosmos although it claims to know the cosmos. We consider it to be no more than an epiphenomenon. We paint the picture of a cosmos that is not only without consciousness but is also dead. And, nevertheless, we claim that our consciousness is able to study it objectively. What a peculiar consciousness is this indeed.

What are the consequences of this denial of the principality of consciousness? First and foremost there has been the withering of religious life by the reducing of levels of consciousness to the lowest and the most ordinary, to the level of ordinary causes. I believe one of the reasons for the withering and marginalization of mysticism within Western Christianity after the Middle Ages—not only in Protestant Christianity, but even to some extent in Roman Catholic Christianity—was this loss of vision of the levels of consciousness. In medieval times, or even in the Renaissance, a Hildegard of Bingen or St. Teresa of Avila had visions of Christ and the angels, and these visions had meaning within that universe. Whereas, when Swedenborg was having his visions in Stockholm, that did not mean anything, given the dominant scientific paradigm of that time. The meaning of Swedenborg’s visions in the Christianity of the seventeenth century is already very different than that of St. Teresa of Avila and the Catholicism of the sixteenth century,

and the reason is the banishment of consciousness from the cosmos, and even reality as such, during the period separating these two figures.

The consequence of cutting off man's consciousness from the higher levels of consciousness, which, however, did not go away by our denying them, was the weakening of access to the transcendent. Taking away the ladder or stairs to the third floor in this building means that you will not try to go up to the third floor any longer, and gradually the existence of the third floor becomes denied. Therefore, the quest for transcendence—for the empowering and illumination of our consciousness, which was the goal of all traditional civilizations—became irrelevant, explained by many to be an illusion. The desire for the transcendent and the gaining of perfection—which defines what, if one views it from the point of view of our ultimate concerns, it means to be human—became horizontalized. It was reduced to gaining more and more information but not necessarily luminous knowledge, which meant a negative transformation of human consciousness.

Another consequence of this loss was that the truths and realities of religion themselves became lost or put in serious doubt. They became either meaningless or reduced to metaphors or simply historical accidents. It is not accidental that most of the influential philosophies of religion that developed from the nineteenth century onward were based on historical reductionism, of reducing historical realities to what can be understood materially, and denying everything that cannot be demonstrated by positive historical methods or proven in a laboratory at Oxford or Harvard. Since we cannot walk on water, then Christ could not have walked on water either. And, therefore, if the people say he did walk on water, either they were blind or they had not been as well educated as us, or it had some other meaning, and it has to be interpreted metaphorically on the basis of our truncated view of reality.

The whole question of the language of religion—the way it spoke to humanity, from the greatest miracles to everyday religious life—became unreal. The turning away in droves of people from religion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the West was not at all accidental, because religion addresses humanity in the context of a universe that is full of consciousness. Not only is the divine reality consciousness, but also there are the hierarchies of angels, of various conscious beings that are now reduced to UFOs. This emphasis of religion upon a cosmos replete with conscious beings holds also true in the non-Abrahamic world, in the Buddhist tradition with the hierarchy of the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and all kinds of other beings in intermediate worlds, and also in the world of Hinduism with its gods and goddesses. There is no religion whose traditional universe is not filled with consciousness. Even the most rationalistic Muslims who try to interpret Islam in a very dry manner cannot deny the reality of the archangel Gabriel, without whom there would not have been a Qur'anic revelation. They cannot deny the verses of the Qur'an which speak of the angels and the jinn.

This became a very important issue, and the reductionism in the understanding of the language of religion and its worldview caused a panic among many people, a fervor to try to reinterpret religion. This occurred for people all the way from atheists to theists, from Karl Marx to Schleiermacher, in the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century all different kinds of new interpretations appeared that people had not needed or confronted previously because the religious view of the cosmos had been their general worldview. They lived in a universe in which God could speak to the trees as well as to us. Angelic

beings could manifest themselves and they could even transmit knowledge. Knowledge and consciousness were not limited to the human order.

This emptying the universe of consciousness even affected the relationship between human beings and God. This change did not destroy the reality of God in the minds of many people, but it did affect that relationship—even the question of prayer and how God answers prayers. Of course, in a mechanistic universe, in which consciousness is placed at the beginning in time, this is a very difficult thing to explain rationally. What are the agencies through which the divine can come into our lives and in the life of the cosmos? Most theologians in the West tried to explain this matter emotionally, without really confronting intellectually, in the most rigorous sense, the challenge of the mechanistic universe. They tried to circumvent the issue. And, of course, Christian theology suffered a great deal in the battles that were fought because one had to accept a more and more scientific point of view.

Today there is a movement for better relationships between religion and science, but it is always the theologians who are asked to give. The scientists never have to give up anything. It is always theology that is retreating step by step, and, therefore, this leaves a deep negative effect upon theological concerns, one of which is the lack of attention to nature as a theological category, a category that Christianity began to leave aside in the seventeenth century. Now that the issue has returned it is still for the most part the scientific view of nature that is accepted as a given and about which theologians are theologizing.

Another important consequence of this transformation is the loss of the meaning of being human. What does it mean to be human? This is not just an academic matter. A Christian or Muslim would say the human being has an immortal soul, but what does soul mean in the accepted view of the cosmos? We have consciousness of being human, of having a human soul, and for believers God is the Spirit with a capital S. And what about our attitude toward and relation to the rest of God's creation? What does that entail? What does that mean? And also, what is the relationship between our being human as an immortal soul and our body? Since the establishment of the mechanistic worldview there has been an indifference to the body as a source of wisdom. Then there seemed to be a sudden rediscovery of the body in the 1960s, expressed through sexuality and new kinds of music, trying to reassert the reality of the body. This was a reaction to the reductionist view prevalent in Western society.

All this goes back precisely to what happened as a result of the loss of the sense of the presence of consciousness throughout reality. Moreover, not only was the sense of the sacredness of human life put into question—because the word sacred does not mean anything in the context of modern science; it is just sentimentality. And with the loss of the sense of the sacred came the loss by human beings of their home in the cosmos—that is, we became homeless in a cosmos that was seen as being no more than energy and matter. Historically, humanity knew its position in the universe and felt at home in it. In the West there was this Ptolemaic system, with the earth in the middle and all of the heavens above, and this did not cause hubris because man was also seen to dwell on the lowest level of the cosmic hierarchy. The Mesoamericans in the Amazon feel they know where they are ontologically, but we do not know where we are—we do not have a home in the cosmos, and we have lost our sense of orientation. The result has been

a very profound sense of alienation, including psychological alienation, which is one of the maladies of the modern world from which traditional society suffered much less. Alienation is a disease like AIDS, a really modern ailment. This is not to say that no one was ever alienated before, but this strong sense of alienation today comes, to a large extent, from the fact that if we accept this reductionist worldview that came into being in the seventeenth century, and take seriously this cutting off of consciousness from the world in which we live, then we become very lonely here. The cosmos is no longer a hospitable place for us, and we are alienated from the world in which we live.

And, of course, if you calculate the probabilities for our being here, from a scientific point of view, and it comes out to be extremely small, then that makes it even stranger that we are here at all. But even if we keep that idea in a corner of our minds, we feel even more that we do not belong here. That is why in our normal lives we do not take these probabilities seriously. Any person who walks in the street and smells a flower, and sees how beautiful it is, that person is not taking this point of view seriously, even if he is a professor teaching it in his class—because our human psyche, to remain sane, has to feel somewhat at home in the world in which we live even if we have become more alienated from it than ever before.

This unnatural alienation has nothing to do with mystical alienation. Many people writing about the environment today have confused the two. Mystical alienation from the world is based on the realization that our ultimate home is paradise, the angelic world; that we are on a journey here; and that this is not our permanent home. This is very different from feeling that, in fact, this world has nothing to do with us and we do not belong here—this has a very different sense, and the two should not be confused with each other. It is as if you were to come to Harvard University for four years and realize that this is not your permanent home, but, nevertheless, you feel that you belong at Harvard and you try to take care of the dorm in which you live while you are here.

But that is not the way many modern people feel. The world around us from which we feel alienated also becomes spiritually worthless, in a sense, and therefore is valued only as far as our own immediate impulses and so-called needs are concerned. The result is catastrophic to the world of nature. This relationship between human beings and the environment is now very much at the center of our attention. Right in the library here at HDS, in the early 1960s, I spent a summer, when I was teaching at Harvard, doing research on the book that became *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, given first as the Rockefeller Lectures at the University of Chicago in 1966. These lectures foretold the environmental crisis, and spoke of the spiritual and inner causes of this crisis.

Practically none of the theologians from the United States or England were at all interested in what I was saying at that time, and did not pay attention to the environmental consequences of the banishment of consciousness from the cosmos. The theology of nature was a non-existing category. Some were angry at me for even speaking about these matters—the fact that the environmental crisis has a religious, theological, spiritual basis, and is not just a result of bad engineering, as some people still think. But the crisis has a deeper root. I think that it has everything to do with what we think of the world around us. What is this tree that I am looking at through the window? If it is just wood for my fireplace, or if the fox is just skin to put around my wife's neck, or if this mountain is just the place from which to extract iron ore and make cars, that is a very



different attitude than if I look upon these things as sharing my own reality, including consciousness.

Let us look at how we view our pets. None of us would accept having our cat fried for dinner. God forbid. My cat is in the hospital right now, and I just paid \$1,000 yesterday for an operation, so I sympathize deeply with it and have love for it. I love animals. Those of us who are animal lovers feel that animals share in our reality. We talk to our cat, our horse, or our dog. We feel they have consciousness. If we accepted the Cartesian view, that these are mechanical objects and they do not share in our reality, we would do with them what we have been doing with the macro-nature around us, decimating it in the name of human needs—sitting on a limb of a tree and cutting it without knowing that we are going to fall down and break our neck very soon through this very process.

We do not think much about such issues anymore, but it is, of course, a crucial matter. Our abominable treatment of nature is, I believe, a direct consequence of our alienation from a world in which there is no participation in a shared reality beyond the material. Even if you say, “My body is made of stardust, and I share the dust of the stars,” this is a nice poetic utterance, but it does not mean anything in the prevalent scientific paradigm. What consciousness do I have of dust except as a reality within my consciousness? And when I identify myself with a star, it has to be something that identifies with my consciousness for such an assertion to be meaningful. In other words, the word *d-u-s-t*, what does it mean? It has to be something that has meaning within my consciousness, but this is what is lacking when we define stardust as simply dead matter in a dead universe devoid of consciousness.

To turn to a more philosophical issue: When you negate that in the beginning was consciousness, and you end up with this idea of consciousness being an island within certain creatures known as human beings, who occupy a certain planet called the earth, then how can we know anything? The Cartesian bifurcation has never been solved. None of the prevalent answers really provide the complete solution. How do I know that something is out there? Not because of the neurons in my brain reacting—neurons and consciousness are not the same thing. There is a very big leap between them. It is like the leap between the material of the canvas and the meaning of the painting on top of it. They are not the same thing. We just identify brain activity with consciousness to evade the profound problem that comes up when we deny the principality of consciousness and its ubiquitous nature.

So how is it possible for us to know the world out there if there is no common element, nothing that unites the knower and the known? This enfeeblement of the methodology of epistemology, which was never a problem for traditional philosophies, has everything to do with the total and radical partition created between what we call consciousness and matter—“matter” meaning the material world, the corporeal world. With the very deep, categorical, absolute, division drawn between consciousness and matter, how can one know anything belonging to a completely different order of reality? No wonder some take recourse to denying the reality of human consciousness, but do so consciously.

We do not claim that matter can know us, or anything else, because knowing is one of the attributes of consciousness. And because we do not attribute any power of consciousness to material things, we cannot say that they know. When I was at MIT, I once asked a question of one of my physics professors. We had just studied integral

calculus and learned that you can integrate the trajectory of a particular object that you throw into the air and, through mathematics, find out exactly what that trajectory is, and where that thing will land. This object, this little pebble, or whatever it is that you are throwing, obviously does not know any calculus, and cannot integrate the function. Therefore, I asked: “How does it know exactly where to go and it does not ever miss? Why does it always land in the same place?”

He said: “Oh, these are simply laws of nature. Do not ask this question because it is not a part of physics.” But he really did not answer the question. If you have a traditional understanding of nature, the question is not so difficult. Supreme consciousness, in a sense, impinges through various levels of reality upon the ether, and the ether upon the elements, and the elements upon what we see out there, certain norms, certain orders, which we are able to observe. And so in the perspective of traditional metaphysics even the laws of nature, which we are able to observe, far from being simply subjective whims or unexplainable facts have an objective and understandable basis. However, this is something that we can no longer rely upon in the way that we think about knower and known, if we operate within the matrix of certain bifurcation.

This leads me to another very important point. Since we have become marginalized, since consciousness has become marginalized, since we have categorically denied the possibility of consciousness outside of the human domain and probably some animals, we have been at a loss for what happens when something goes outside of the definition that we have determined and either seeks or claims to find consciousness elsewhere in the cosmos. This problem never existed before. Take for example the question of UFOs or alien abductions. It is too easy to say: “These are all crazy people. Throw them into the insane asylum.” It is interesting that for traditional societies such problems never existed.

All civilizations have marginalized and rejected people who have had a worldview contrary to the dominant worldview of that civilization. Today we do it in the name of science. There is a famous professor here at Harvard, John Mack, who studied hundreds of cases of UFO sightings, clinically and scientifically. Even if you do not accept that these people are telling the truth, this phenomenon is related to a kind of deep urge of connectedness, with intelligence, with consciousness, beyond our immediate human terrestrial sphere. And this matter is not irrelevant. It is now part and parcel of pop culture or common culture. Children are brought up with movies about aliens and science fiction.

What function does this fill? Why are there so many people interested in these things? The “beings” involved in such experiences have taken the place, actually, of all the non-human intelligences and forms of consciousness in traditional civilizations as we see in fairytales and traditional stories. Every traditional civilization was full of these accounts, and they percolated into children’s stories told by grandmothers to the young. This satisfied a very deep yearning of the human soul for companionship in the world in which we live, and the stories were not considered simply fiction.

When you cut human being off from that cosmic world of consciousness— when that world is no longer considered relevant—myth is converted to science fiction and the vision of angels to the experience of extraterrestrial beings and UFOs. A myth then becomes something unreal rather than real. Myth used to be a sacred reality, but now it is seen as unreality. In its place have now come all kinds of pseudo-myths, such as science fiction itself, which is an attempt to try to fill the void with, you might say, pseudo- sacred

writings. Why do children want to see strange, extraterrestrial looking beings in films? These are extremely profound issues that deal with the total psyche of a society that has been banned from even thinking that it is possible to have contact within a universe in which there are other forms of not only life but also intelligence and consciousness.

This desacralization of the cosmos and the ensuing alienation has also made a sham of the metaphysical and philosophical basis of ethics. This is a major claim that I am making, and is really a subject for another day, but let me just say a word about it. In all periods of human history, ethics was related to a vision of reality. It had a cosmic aspect. We think of the battle between the good spirits, the *ahuras*, and the bad, the *devas*, in Zoroastrianism, of the treatise of St. Augustine on the good. We think of Neo-Confucianism. Whatever traditional world you enter, there is a permanent set of ethical norms that are never only human ethics linked to the human world. Rather, they have a cosmic aspect. For the Abrahamic world at least—you had the ternary of God, human beings, and the cosmos. And in the world of ethics there were relations and correspondences between them. Through this depleting of the cosmos of consciousness, we have made any ethical act toward the world of nature contrived and without a metaphysical and cosmological basis. Regarding Christian ethics, for example, we adhere to being respectful to our neighbor: “Thou shalt not kill.” But within the scientific paradigm what is the reason for not cutting down a tree or not killing a particular animal except sentimentality or expediency?

In the sacred scriptures, there were explanations given for an ethics encompassing the world of nature as well as that of human beings. Animals and plants were seen as God’s creation, with spiritual value, as were rivers and mountains. Those notions are now scientifically meaningless, and any environmental ethics based on that view of the world is based on mere sentimentality. It is not based on reality, if you accept the scientific view of the world as reality. It’s like talking about the sacredness of human life. In one breath we mention the sacredness of human life and with the next breath note that its basis is nothing but DNA. What is sacred about DNA if it is just some molecules banging against each other in certain configurations? If we reject the sacred, reject that it is the wisdom of God that is imprinted upon the DNA, that all creation bears the imprint of God—a meaningless statement in modern biology—where then does the sacredness of human life come from?

Even the withering away of Christian ethics, which we now see before us after several hundred years of its survival even since the Scientific Revolution, has to do a lot with the more recent consequences of the extension of the desacralized view of nature into the domain of human life itself. This is especially notable when it comes to environmental ethics, which we need to create in a serious way if we are to be able to live in the future. For now, animal activists and others like them are outside of the mainstream. They are considered “crazy” people who tie themselves to trees and refuse to come down. These acts are not part of the mainstream of society, which is not able to develop an environmental ethics that is also in accord with the worldview that dominates our lives. A similar disjunction occurs in our hospitals because of the purely mechanical treatment of the human body, and tensions are created by the fact that some people still believe they have a soul and that the human body is not just a mechanical gadget. All of these tensions present great challenges that the still dominant worldview poses for us, and are signs that this paradigm is now falling apart.

Finally, if you take seriously the rejection of the idea of consciousness being the beginning not only of time but also, in principle, of the universe, it really shatters all the deepest hopes of human beings. First of all, hopes of immortality become mere dreams. And that is why we have, for the first time in human history, the development of a society in which many people do not dare to harbor these hopes. Great fear brings these hopes back, but, over all, these hopes that relate to the deepest needs of our souls are no longer meaningful or realizable within the framework of a worldview based on the primacy of the material rather than consciousness.

If we have come into being only from the matrix of time and space, we cannot transcend time and space. There is nothing that can ever exist at the omega point that was not there at the alpha point. I have written very strongly against Teilhard de Chardin and other theologians who believe that at the beginning was matter and at the end there will be spirit, because as Christ said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” He did not say just, “I am the Omega.” If we do not have our root in consciousness, which is beyond time, which is non-temporal, we shall never attain to the nontemporal.

These are the deepest aspirations of human beings, aspirations for immortality—that is, for an experience beyond time and space, for we are the only beings who are aware that we shall die. Even if we are good scientists, we know we are going to die. The diversions that we create for ourselves cannot prevent us from thinking of the fact that sooner or later we shall die. No diversion can prevent us from that truth. Hence the significance of the hope for immortality, which is inseparable from the deepest nature of our souls—which are in reality created for immortality.

The reality of human life, whose terminus is the call of death, and what that implies spiritually, has, of course, been very strongly challenged by the worldview that reduces consciousness to an accidental epiphenomenon. I believe the time has come for us to take this challenge seriously, to rethink what consciousness is in relation to our life, in relation to the manner in which we live, to the world in which we live, to our way of knowing, our sentience, our experience. And also it is time to realize fully the consequences of the negation of the primacy of consciousness in all its import.

It is logically absurd to deny the primacy of consciousness, because as soon as we do so, we do it through consciousness. But a lot of people have claimed to have done so—in fact, many professors on this campus. Behavioral psychologists and the like, of course, do not believe there is such a thing as consciousness. Although it is logically absurd, they have nevertheless claimed such a view. We need to realize the consequences of this state of affairs for human beings living in such trying and difficult times.

I believe that ultimately, of course, consciousness will have the final say, but it is for us while we have consciousness—this great, great gift—to use it properly to understand what it means to live consciously, to live fully with awareness, to know where we are coming from, where we are going, and why we are here.

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With thanks to the  
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