

The Mind Field

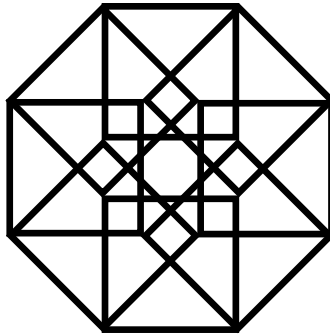
By Robert Ornstein

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Robert E. Ornstein

THE MIND FIELD

A
Personal
Essay



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For Punkington,
Midgit. and Moose-Brain

Foreword

What changes we've seen in these last twenty years!

I wrote *The Mind Field* at a time when millions of people in Europe and America were first contacting different forms of the psychological and esoteric traditions of the East. And with the intense early enthusiasm, there came the inevitable excesses: weekend enlightenment seminars, instant healing rituals, the love of the exotic for its own sake, and much more.

Such a reaction caused many more sober and rational people to reject the whole thing, not wishing to be associated with tie-dyed psychiatry.

And so two new cultures clashed, the modern rationalist scientific and the modern "alternative" culture.

Now, twenty years later, the twain meet. Forms of medicine once thought to be completely irrelevant now are seen to be important in keeping people healthy and free of disease (and in these cost-conscious '90s, well at lower cost). That individuals make decisions on bases other than the analytical is now understood to be, if not "rational" (in the sense of reasoned), but at the very least adaptive. Multiple forms of intelligences are understood as the norm, and they have different ways of acting, deciding and knowing.

Like the flames from a new oil well, many of the spectacular flames of spiritual practices, too, have faded to be replaced by the continuous flow of teachings from people like Idries Shah.

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The Mind Field is a book of its time and should be read as such, as much an historical document (since history speeds up these days) as it is for the content. I haven't edited it, as I could, since to do so would mix understandings from different eras. Better to get a look at the scene in the mid-1970s and to think, as I said, how far we've come!

Robert Ornstein
October 1995

Preface

We are now on the threshold of a new understanding of man and of consciousness, one which might unite the scientific, objective, external approach of Western civilization and the personal, inward disciplines of the East. The emergence of this new synthesis has caused many to flock, unthinkingly, to rudimentary spiritual sideshows, which are quick, cheap, and often flashy. These reductions have given strength to others' total lack of interest. I write to develop a more secure position, one of interested yet candid assessment, somewhere between the two dominant positions: the almost reflexive rejection of what is conventionally understood as "mysticism," by many in the "hard" areas of contemporary life; the reflexive adulation characteristic of the slavish consumers of guruism, "instant enlightenment training," and other degenerations.

I spend much of my professional career as a drudge, performing research on the function of the two hemispheres of the human brain. My colleagues and I write technical papers on spectrum analyses of electroencephalographic indications of differences in function between the two halves of the brain, and on the correlation of transient changes in brain function with cognitive performance. To support our research I worry over technical grant proposals and the construction of a laboratory, and share in the hiring and firing of personnel. And to communicate our findings I write textbooks, organize symposia, and try to keep a small interdisciplinary institute solvent.

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Though I am asked constantly what I think of various developments in consciousness, since I am involved in the area, my normal academic responsibilities preclude much response. Most of those who inquire are people who are not professionally involved in the study of the mind, but who may have heard or felt something of an extended consciousness or of esoteric traditions. They have heard about meditation, or about Eastern traditions of mysticism, or about training of intuition, yet naturally they recoil from such confusions as learning Sanskrit, Arabic, or Japanese as part of a spiritual endeavor; supporting “Tibetan pen-pals”; searching for Atlantis; or joining “gourmet vegetarian societies.” These people may have heard of the new discoveries about the right hemisphere of the brain, or about research in parapsychology or in the nature of the “new religions,” and they may be wondering *what is in it for them*, how much of all this is relevant to their own lives.

I have attempted to write a book that is not primarily for the academic community—except as academic people might personally be interested in these areas. There is little technical or academic jargon. The book is short, its ideas and conclusions distilled. It is not a textbook but a personal essay on the results of investigations undertaken, originally, for myself. It is written in plain language for serious people, whatever their technical or professional competence in the areas of the study of consciousness.

I hope the book will prove in a small way elucidating to many who have wondered whether they should go to a psychotherapist to deal with their interest in consciousness, whether there is anything useful in “awareness training,” whether they should meditate, whether they should travel to the East, whether they should seek refuge in Shamanism or in systems of thought more relevant for cultures different from ours, or more relevant perhaps for a different epoch.

I have tried to make the essay as clear and compact as possible, and I have tried not to mince any words or conclusions, in contradistinction to the normal politic manner of

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the textbook writer and the pedant. I also have included a few interesting designs to look at, both to convey the overall theme of the differences between the container, or the package, of this extended knowledge of man, and the content—and in some cases to assist in the communication of that content, especially to the brain's right hemisphere.

This book is based more on personal experience than any of my other books, based as it is partly on my travels in Asia, Africa, and Europe, as well as on my twelve years as a research psychologist and on my personal acquaintance with people involved in meditation, parapsychology, brain research, and connected disciplines.

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The Container and the Content

Cross and Christians, end to end, I examined them. He was not on the Cross. I went to the Hindu temple, to the ancient pagoda. In none of them was there any sign. To the uplands of Herat I went, and to Kandahar. I looked. He was not on the heights or in the lowlands. Resolutely, I went to the summit of the mountain of Kaf. There only was the dwelling of the Anqa bird. I went to the Kaaba of Mecca. He was not there. I asked about him from Avicenna. . . . I looked into my own heart. In that, his place, I saw him. He was in no other place.

Thus the poet Jallaludin Rumi of Balkh described his own search for knowledge in the literary manner acceptable seven hundred years ago. His manner of expression, rather than the essence of his thought, has been much imitated by contemporary obsessionals. Many writers confuse spirituality with a lofty metaphysical whining over the disappointments of contemporary life. One anonymous contemporary spiritual flatulent writes, “In the personal crisis of *my* life, where should I turn?” I hope not to add to the reader’s worry: this book will not be more of the same otherworldly longing. Yet I begin with Rumi, primarily to emphasize the distinction between inward and outward aspects of truth.

It is an unfortunate accident of the twentieth century that those most interested in personal knowledge and in an extended

conception of man tend to be those least suited to gaining or using them. The receptive investigator encounters innumerable freaky, peaky psychologies and associations, advertisements in the Sunday newspapers for courses of training in instant self-improvement, phone solicitations, "quest seminars," cults devoted to parapsychological phenomena, self-preoccupation societies in the name of Encounter, Freud, or Ouspensky, and tiresome loonies of almost every persuasion. Many people are looking for a cause or doctrine to attach themselves to, which will take them to a "new level of consciousness" through such enterprises as boarding unidentified flying objects, or through a "new development" such as next year's yellow-vegetable or all-marsupial diet for weight loss, job improvement, sexual potency, and spiritual development.

These cults and people are, simply, not an appropriate ground for anyone wishing to reintroduce a more complete understanding of man. Responsible people in the arts, sciences, business, humanities, and the professions shy away from this area because of a bad odor associated with its clannish, cult aspects. Who could fail to be repelled by a turgid metaphysicization of almost every aspect of life, one which leaves no room for ordinary joys and accomplishments; by writers who are always having their guts wrenched by one or another imagined "crisis," whether of the spirit, of business, or of the flesh? If an interest in consciousness and an extended personal understanding of life has, in our time, been the province mainly of those outside the mainstream of contemporary life, it is understandable in terms of the radical cultural changes of the twentieth century.

The superheated and explosive economic, social, and scientific growth of the past two generations has left many who have grown up in this era convinced that a world without material limits is the norm. It has, for many, been their only experience of the world. The ideals of limitless expansion have shaped our marketplace, economic planning, and social life, and they do

inform the background of science and the humanities. Our politicians conventionally promise as much as is possible in the relief of the constancies of our condition; our scientific endeavor is unchecked by a traditional perspective; and our culture is the best-educated, wealthiest, most “emotionally aware” in history, and—as a concomitant perhaps—one of the most spiritually illiterate. In an era devoted primarily to decreasing death rates, improving living conditions, and developing science, there is little time left for other considerations. Yet, in spite of this progress in our material welfare and health, we do not often note that the death rate is still 100 percent.

We are, I think, at a transition point: the beginning of the end of this adolescence. In many areas people are beginning to feel that we have left something (without knowing what) out of our cultural upbringing, out of our science, medicine, education, and personal development. Perhaps we base too many of our plans on the assumption of social and material progress, an assumption rooted in the seemingly limitless growth of the past two generations.

Yet even those people who are most concerned and interested in traditional approaches to human development still attempt to judge them with the stunted perspective of a contemporary ethnocentrism. Our “no limits” culture provides the basis: The North American baseball championship for men is the “World” Series. We may be informed by our television weather announcer that the “all-time” record for rain or heat was set on a certain date: here, “all-time” usually means the past hundred years. Our medical, educational, and scientific journals rarely refer to any fact or finding published before 1940 (with the exception of an obligatory honorific reference to Greece), and anything discovered or understood before the First World War is considered ancient history. In our approach to science and to consciousness, we bear the remnants of identifying our culture’s specific developments with the sum total of knowledge and we attempt to measure some

of the most important traditional human ideas on the scanty yardstick of our own habits of mind.

Scientists and humanist scholars are men and women of their times and share both the benefits of our culture's developments and the blindness of our collective shortsight. Their blindness and distortions render many of our otherwise most competent and educated people unequipped to judge ideas and developments in personal knowledge. Even those who are most interested often treat personal development as a less valuable side of themselves. Ideas in that area might seem "too old," associated too much with an old-fashioned and degenerate religious mysticism, perhaps conveyed by a nut or a tramp, a person less well-socialized. We find, then, a large group of productive men and women, who might draw from and contribute to an extended understanding of human nature, closed off from it by the strengths of their cultural training—and a second group all too eager to be told that "life is an illusion" and to join up here and climb aboard the next Kosmik Union Special, flying saucer, or Guru-of-the-Month Club.

An interested observer of the middle ground is in for some considerable discomfort, since those actively pursuing several interesting ideas have been drawn a bit over the edge. Parapsychology, to the receptive mind, is an area of research which is at least worth some serious, sober, and open-minded scientific investigation. However, one sometimes finds conversations with enthusiasts in the area sliding from a reasonable discussion of a single experiment to the Bermuda Triangle, unidentified flying objects, oddball encounters, or massage techniques. People seeking "growth" find their needs for personal knowledge blunted and diverted to successful and rich institutions, with massage, sexual athletics, investment schemes, parties, incomprehensible doctrines such as those of Gurdjieff, Kahunism (a flying-saucer cult), "yoga tag," or simpleminded meditation offered as a substitute for transcendence. Such "growth centers," I fear, are to

be understood more in the sense of “growth stocks” and childish self-indulgence than as anything seriously concerned with human development.*

I attempt, in this book, to begin to separate the current lofty metaphysical inflation, the goofiness, the outright lies, and the commercialism, from the real possibility and discipline; to separate the more occult extravagance from a developed and hard knowledge about areas not represented enough in contemporary life. I hope that these and other efforts will lead toward a new synthesis of ideas both traditional and modern,** one which might yield a consistent development of man found neither in the static traditional cultures of the East nor in one so unrooted as our own.

There is an intriguing moment toward the end of the widely disseminated television series and book, *The Ascent of Man*. Jacob Bronowski, historian of science and ideas, after a brilliant account of the intellectual and material development of Western societies, sums up the “ethnocentric” position:

And I am infinitely saddened to find myself suddenly surrounded in the west by a sense of terrible loss of nerve, a retreat from knowledge into—into what? Into Zen Buddhism; into falsely profound questions about, Are we not really just animals at bottom; into extrasensory perception and mystery. They do not lie along the line of what we are now able to

* This simplemindedness is often communicated by the announcements for these “centers.” Here is a recent poem by one of the successful graduates:

A Celebration

I swim in the sun
I sail to the stars
I swing with a song
I sway with the wind
I see the sound of a sigh
I am centered
I am Sophie

Sophie
Age 32

** Or Eastern and Western.

know if we devote ourselves to it: an understanding of man himself. . . . Self-knowledge, at last bringing together the experience of the arts and the explanations of science, waits ahead of us.

Here, in a nutshell, is precisely that insular view of our intellectual and material “ascent” which has left many blinded to the specialization of different traditions—shortsight which is identical to that of the “all-time” record. In the Western scientific tradition, we transcend the limits of personal knowledge by developing the outward, “objective” sciences, whose data are available to all observers and are based upon repeatable experiments. Yet we do not understand that the vagaries of ordinary personal experience can be transcended in another way, by inward studies of the shifting personal biases themselves. In the East, those most concerned with the problems of man, life, and the mind have developed specialized exercises to defeat these continual transient shifts in personal awareness. These developments of consciousness occasion a mode of knowledge complementary to the ordered sequence of intellectual inquiry. That hundreds of years of religious inquisition and degeneration might well have formed the basis of our opinion of such “esoteric” endeavor I have no doubt, yet the rejection of the essence of religious and philosophical tradition has left a fundamental gap in our contemporary approach to reality. Disciplines and techniques of human development are beginning to return to prominence in the West, in a new form, some even divorced from their religious or cultural associations. These techniques and traditions meet unthinking rejection by some—and equally unthinking acceptance by others.

In this book I intend to explore several of the most important developments, sometimes in differing prose styles. Beginning with the reasons for our continual searches in this area, one should keep in mind another statement of Rumi: “Counterfeiters exist only because there is true gold.”