

Psychology of Consciousness

By Robert Ornstein



MALOR BOOKS
Los Altos, California

This fourth edition published by Malor Books 2021
Copyright © The Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge 2021

All rights reserved.

First published in the United States of America by
W. H. Freeman and Company 1972

Published by The Viking Press, Inc., 1973

Published by Pelican Books 1975

First revised edition published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977

The second revised edition first published by Penguin Books 1986

The third revised edition first published by Arkana 1996

Copyright © Robert E. Ornstein 1972, 1977, 1986

Contents pages constitute an extension of this copyright page.

This Malor edition: ISBN 978-1-949358-98-8

MALOR BOOKS

www.malorbooks.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

for an earlier edition:

Ornstein, Robert Evans.

The psychology of consciousness. Bibliography: p.
Includes index.

I. Consciousness. I. Title
BF311.O75 1986 153 85-19149
ISBN O 14 02.2621 4

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Contents

Acknowledgments	vi
Preface	x
1 Introduction: The Study of Consciousness	1
2 The Conscious Human Mind: Selection, Reception, and Creation	7
3 The Workings of the Conscious Mind	45
4 The Machinery of Consciousness	65
<i>The Legend of Nasrudin</i>	90
5 The Temporal Dimension of Consciousness	97
6 Multiple Consciousness	117
7 The Organized Systems: Changing Consciousness	147
8 The Perils of the “Journey”	179
<i>The Sufi Tradition by Elizabeth Hall</i>	194
<i>Mysteries in the West: Strange Rites by Idries Shah</i>	213
9 On the Development of Consciousness: An Important “Way”	217
10 The Teaching-Story: Observations on the Folklore of Our Modern Thought by Idries Shah	253
References	279
Index	

1000
600
500
400
300
200



1

Introduction: The Study of Consciousness

Is there any number higher than 100?

A man, having looted a city, tried to sell one of the spoils, an exquisite rug. “Who will give me 100 gold pieces for this rug?” he cried throughout the town.

After the sale was completed, a comrade approached the seller, and asked,

“Why did you not ask more for that precious rug?”

“Is there any number higher than 100?” asked the seller.

It is easy, all too easy, to be smug about the rugseller. However, we are like him, since our own conceptions and consciousness limit what is possible for us to understand. The structure of consciousness often acts as a barrier to understanding, as many conceptions may act as barriers to action.

Consider this: It was once thought impossible for a man to run a mile in less than 4 minutes. It was even called the “4-minute-mile” barrier, as if effort of another order were required to run in **4:00:00 instead of 3:59:99**. Running times hovered around the magic mark for years; each effort coming so close to the mark, seeming to confirm it as a real entity.

Then one man broke the “barrier” and quite soon many others were able to surmount it, a mark once thought impossible. We seem to set mental limits on the possible boundaries of our world and work within these limits. It is our assumed limitations that this book is about.

According to most surveys, we are quite satisfied, satisfied with our lives, and our concept of who we are and what we can do. For most upwardly mobile Westerners prosperity continues. But we are like the rugseller in many ways—our sights are too low. Is there anything beyond what we know of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

Many people who have a well-determined goal in life have asked me, whether it is whispered quietly after a lecture, or presented more boldly in writing: Why bother? Why is consciousness important? Especially since many successful people feel that they are getting ahead all right as it is, our society is successful ... I think it is that they are selling themselves short.

It is my view that humans are a much more extraordinary animal than we yet know.

Even in this era when there are psychologists appearing regularly on talk shows, many people, especially successful ones, do not understand that our possibilities are greater in some directions, greater than anything we can currently consider. It is also my view that the *dangers* inherent in human life and even in being human are increasing daily as our ability to control our physical environment increases, while our ability to understand the implications of our actions lags far behind.

We Are, Literally, in a Race with Ourselves

We are now biologically obsolete, as we evolved to suit the conditions of a different world, a world that ended at the latest 20,000 years ago. We have not changed much during

that period, although it seems a long time to us.

“Prehistory,” after all, takes in all this period, from the hunter-gatherers through the beginnings of civilization, to the agricultural, industrial, and other revolutions, and we are quite accustomed to thinking that twentieth-century humans in Western society are very different from those living in “remotest antiquity”—cave dwellers, hunter-gatherers, those who lived just before the agricultural revolution, long before civilization. This smugness is the current version of the shocked thinking of Darwin’s time when the citizens of Victorian England simply couldn’t accustom themselves to the idea that they were akin to apes. For most of us it is the same—“Surely,” we say, “we have transcended the actions and reactions of those precivilized savages!”

But to anyone who is aware of the recent discoveries in human evolution, our own time scale must be reset. Human beings, and our predecessors, evolved over a period lasting hundreds of millions of years. Our predecessors stood up and probably shared food 4 million years ago. Five hundred thousand years ago there were organized settlements in what is now southern France. We certainly have not been able to change significantly in the last 100,000 years.

The last 30,000 years are an insignificant amount of time in evolutionary terms: There has been *no time* to improve the development of our mental capacities, our ability to meet the challenges of the environment, our ability to think, reason, and create. We are the same people who were “designed” to live when our species numbered hundreds of small bands, roaming around the savannas of East Africa. We were designed to respond to immediate danger quickly—those who did lived long enough to produce us.

Our dangers, in the current era, are of a different kind: No one is prepared to view 15,000 murders during puberty (the average child, according to recent studies, does, on television and in the cinema); no one is biologi-

cally prepared for the destruction that might follow a nuclear war (think of it—billions could die within hours, and this to a race which *numbered only in the millions for most of its history*); no one is prepared biologically for the complexity of the crowds, the noise, and the pollution of the urban surround in many cities. And there is no time for the glacial processes of evolution to produce those changes in us; our own brain took more than 500 million years to “create.” We don’t have that kind of time!

Will we be able to make the changes necessary to understand our world and alter our course? Our own world has changed radically in our own lifetimes—with computers, air and space travel, the threat of nuclear war, man-made climate change. All these are unprecedented. And yet, we have the same mental system that we had ages ago, one that tries, in the face of everything, to keep things stable, simple, and neat.

There are contemporary psychologies described here that allow us, perhaps for the first time, to understand these inflexible tendencies of mind. There are advanced psychologies that agree that the human being is an animal who wishes and attempts desperately to make his life as routine and stable as possible, keeping to fixed assumptions and paradigms, while the world changes continuously.

* * *

In the next few years we will discover whether human beings will be able to adapt to the enormous changes that have occurred in the past century. Will we be able to feed the world’s population? We will know whether it is possible to educate our young to face the contemporary world as it is. Can we avoid a nuclear holocaust or the drastic effects of climate change, some of which we already experience? There are countless solutions proposed to the continuous problems of modern life, and I do not wish to in any way

reject any of them. However, it is in an understanding of our mental system that may well provide the clues to those who wish to effect changes—for we do have some extraordinary abilities, but also the accumulated limitations of millions of years. At least now we know what some of our mental limitations are!

Our biological evolution is, for all practical purposes, at its end. *There will be no further biological evolution without human “conscious evolution.”* And this may not happen without first an understanding of what our consciousness is, what it was originally designed to do, and where the points of possible change may be. That is what *The Psychology of Consciousness* is about.



2

The Conscious Human Mind: Selection, Reception, and Creation

Seeing Double

A father said to his double-seeing son, “Son, you see two instead of one.”

“How can that be?” the boy replied. “If I were, there would seem to be four moons up there in place of two.”

Consider your own consciousness, and reflect for a moment upon its contents. You will probably find a mixture of thoughts, ideas, sensations, fantasies. Images appear and go, ideas emerge fleetingly, only to disappear again, an ache or a pain surfaces, then a desire.

How are we going to get that contract? Will I see him or her or it again? That tastes good. How can I help those people? ... and much more. An object appears—one or more trees, books, chairs. We become aware of other people walking, especially as they might walk into us, as individual bodies, as voices in the air all around us.

We move in three-dimensional space and actively manipulate perceived objects—we may turn the pages of a book, sit in a chair, speak to someone, listen to a speaker. Normally the content of our consciousness is a representation of outside reality and it can be successful to the extent that we survive. There are successes at all “levels.” On a high level it may be: Do we get the job? And on the lower levels it may be: Do we cross the street without getting hit?

In our own personal experience we are sure that “our world” thus has some validity, we usually go a bit further. At almost each moment of each day we make the same mistake as does the double-seeing son—we immediately assume that our own personal consciousness *is* the world, that an outside “objective” reality is somehow *received by us in its completeness*. After all, we’ve cut the tree and made it into a table, we’ve drunk the same wine as have all the other people at dinner, we’ve gotten the job. Most people never really see any issue here; for ordinary purposes the “reality” we experience goes unchallenged.

Remember the early Disney cartoons? In them, a little man at a switchboard, located somewhere like our very own brain, projected physical “pictures” of the world on a sort of consciousness screen, something like a giant projection television. And, though you will again laugh, the way you might have at the rug seller, this is the ordinary belief of many, many people. In fact, in years of teaching, and years of discussing these issues, when I inquire about how most people understand how they register or respond to the outside world, they eventually end up at a version of this mental Disneyland in some form.

But even a moment’s directed reflection will confirm that the “naïve reality” idea, in which our mind somehow directly mirrors the world, cannot be true. If there were a consciousness screen somewhere in there, who would see it? Does that little man (or woman) inside have another one still farther inside? And, in addition, we sometimes experience things that are not physically present. We hallucinate, daydream, imagine, scheme, wish. And each night we dream and experience events that we produce completely by ourselves.

And consider, too, the enormous variety of physical energies that we contact at each moment of our lives. The air, or more properly, our atmospheric environment,

contains and conveys to us energy in the electromagnetic band: visible light, X-rays, radio waves, infrared radiation. In addition the air is mechanically vibrated, by vocal chords, drums, passing cars, the movement of our feet; this conveys energy that transforms into sound information. There is constant energy from the gravitational field; there is varying pressure in our own body; there is the movement of gaseous matter in the air; and there are hundreds more events out there. We generate our own internal stimuli as well—thoughts, internal organ sensations, muscular activity, pains, feelings, and more.

And all this occurs simultaneously, not even as neatly as it can be described, and it continues for as long as we are alive. Imagine being aware of each process at each moment. Immediately you will see that our personal consciousness can never, even at any one instant, represent or reflect all of the external world, but must consist of an extremely small fraction of the entire “reality.”

We do not even possess the sensory equipment to perceive many of the energies that strike us, such as ultraviolet or infrared.

And then there are many questions to be considered (which we will try to answer) once it is registered that our consciousness is limited. What is it limited *to*? *Why* is it limited? How do the selections and the exclusions operate? How can we achieve a stable mind if all we can do is to select a little of what is out there? How do we keep from getting overwhelmed?

An individual consciousness evolved for the primary purpose of ensuring the individual’s biological survival. Its major concern is for its own welfare. After all, there must be a “me first” system that takes priority. It is oriented toward action for the most part, paying attention to the outside world, it is sensitive, and sometimes oversensitive, to threatening organisms.

Our biological inheritance determines that we *select* the sensory information that is to reach the brain from the mass of information reaching us. This is an exquisite undertaking, and it is done through a vast network of filters, sensors, and censors, all working with microsecond timing. This immediate selection process sorts out survival-related stimuli from which we are able to, somehow, miraculously construct a stable representation of the world.

There are such a great number of routine miracles in this system that the scientist is dazzled: Somehow a collection of very short waves in the air combine and can become paintings in the mind; other longer ones become music; a group of molecules fits right in to receptors in the palate and becomes *cassoulet*. And it is within ourselves that it is all done, and done at every moment of every day.

If we can realize at the outset that our ordinary consciousness is something we must of necessity create in order to survive in the world, we can also credit, at least as a working hypothesis, that there may well be other ways the world may be organized, at least in other organisms if not in ourselves.

And if this consciousness is a *personal* construction, then each person can change his consciousness simply by *changing the way* he constructs it. The psychologist William James compared this process to that of a sculptor carving a statue out of marble—the process largely involves selection and limitation, but each sculptor's statue is unique, as is each person's consciousness.

We see that the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities. Consciousness consists in the comparison of these with each other, the selection of some and the suppression of others, of the rest by the reinforcing and inhibiting agency of attention. The highest and most celebrated mental products are filtered from the data chosen by the faculty next beneath, out of

the mass offered by the faculty below that, which mass was in turn sifted from a still larger amount of yet simpler material, and so on. The mind, in short, works on the data it received much as a sculptor works on his block of stone. In a sense, the statue stood there from eternity. But there were a thousand different ones beside it. The sculptor alone is to thank for having extricated this one from the rest. Just so the world of each of us, however different our several views of it may be, all lay embedded in the primordial chaos of sensation, which gave the mere matter to the thought of all of us indifferently. We may, if we like, by our reasoning unwind things back to the black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world we feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. Other sculptors, other statues from the same stone! Other minds, other worlds, from the same monotonous and inexpressive chaos! My world is but one in a million, alike embedded and alike real to those who may abstract them. How different must be the world in the consciousness of ants, cuttlefish, or crab!

How, then, do we take the chaos and “make sense” out of it? Each of us selects and constructs a personal world in several ways. Our sense organs gather information which the brain can modify and sort. This heavily filtered input is compared with memory, expectations, and body movements until, finally, our consciousness is constructed as a “best guess” about reality.