

THE WORLD IS A STAGE . . .
AND ALL THE ILLUSIONS ARE ACTORS

*I died from mineral and plant became;
Died from plant and took sentient frame;
Died from beast and took human dress;
When, by dying, did I e'er grow less?*

*Jalal Al Din Rumi
(a Sufi poet; 1207-1275)*

*Probably a crab would be filled with a sense of outrage if it could hear us class it without
ado or apology as a Crustacean, and thus dispose of it. "I am no such things," it would
say: "I am myself, alone."*

*William James, from his
"Varieties of Religious Experiences"*

More bits and pieces.

There is a very funny Gary Larson FAR SIDE cartoon in which a group of cows are standing on their back legs in a field discussing some terribly deep philosophical question when a look-out cow yells, "Car!" The next frame has the cows down on all fours, eating grass, doing what we would expect cows to be doing when out to pasture.

The humor here is in the idea that cows could have a secret life we humans don't know anything about, but there is another point of order that is not so obvious. Larson wanted to show his cows as something more than mindless farm animals, so he made

them appear human-like. In doing so, he underscored a belief most of us unconsciously hold dear . . . that the only *meaningful* existence is *human* existence.¹

We are about to delve into the idea of consciousness, Eastern style. In doing so, we will be examining a view that does *not* consider mankind to be the end-all, be-all. That is, human consciousness is considered to be important, but there are levels of consciousness believed to exist both above and below the state we humans find ourselves in that are just as important.

There was a Renaissance philosopher named Descartes who tried to build a logical argument for God. He began by questioning, "What do I know for certain?" He then proceeded to show that from his own point of view, everything *could* be an illusion² . . . everything, that is, except one thing. It was *he* who was wondering and doubting, which meant *he had to exist*.

Although he went on from there, his observation about *awareness* is what is important to us.

Have you ever stopped and thought about how remarkable it is that you are aware?³ The first time I thought about such things was when I was driving through the Arizona desert going back to ASU during my college years. I was not a particularly thoughtful young man at the time, but I remember being absolutely stunned at the sight of a sun-drenched butte standing a number of miles from the road. As I drove by, it struck me how remarkable it was that I was *intimately sensing* that beauty when, in fact, it was wholly out of my reach—when it was literally miles away. Until then, I had never recognized my *ability to be aware* as being at all extraordinary.

Of course, scientists are quick to point out that our ability to sense physical structures *out there* would not exist if our eyes were missing. In fact, science adamantly maintains that you and I are aware *only* because we have bodies with sensory organs like

¹ We don't, for instance, factory farm *human* babies for food, but we are more than happy to factory farm *cow* babies (veal) for food. Most of us simply don't view animals as being as important as humans.

² Even his *loved ones*, he argued, could be nothing more than players in his own, gigantic, personal dream.

³ A corollary to this question would be, "Have you ever thought about how remarkable it is to be conscious of your existence?"

eyes and ears, etc. Without a body, the assertion goes, nobody would be aware of anything.

The problem is, *that might not be the case*. Certainly, mechanisms for sensory awareness exist within life forms. It would be non-sensical to have a physical body, whether created by design or blind evolution, that *didn't* sport eyes or ears or at least some kind of mechanism to sense physical stimuli around it. Nobody is going to argue with that.

But there may be more . . .

As much as each of us associates *our-self* with *our body*, India's Vedic tradition suggests that, in fact, the *ability to be aware* is a reflection of the only thing that is truly *real* and *lasting* within us. And even though they acknowledge that Consciousness is inextricably woven into the experiences of the physical body—so much so that during life we don't readily recognize it as a separate thing—the tradition maintains that *being conscious* is what does not cease to exist with the death of the body.

If we really are formless Consciousnesses—Awarenesses, Beings animating and experiencing through a physical body—questions arise. "Why," for instance, "do we exist, and from whence have we come?"

Although it may not be immediately obvious, these questions are related to an even more important question concerning *the nature of God*. Specifically, "Why did God create the universe in the first place?"⁴

To answer that, consider *a line* in Euclidean space.⁵

Although you have dealt with line *segments* in math and physics classes, a *real* line is an altogether different matter. It is a geometric structure that extends to infinity in both directions, never looping or crossing, never erring in its straight path. A line is a perfect, infinite, one-dimensional entity.

⁴ As pointed out two chapters ago, a Being with the power to create something as minutely complex yet potentially immense as a universe would surely not do so without a damn good reason. If we had some ideas as to what that reason was, it *would* be easier to understand where humans fit into the scheme of things.

⁵ Euclidean space is the kind of geometry most people identify with in their everyday lives. In Euclidean space, the lengths a and b of the sides of a right triangle will be related to the hypotenuse c of the triangle by the relationship $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$.

Now mentally *pin your line at a point*, then ever so carefully *rotate it about that pivot*. In doing so, you generate *a plane*. What is interesting is that a plane is a perfect, infinite, two-dimensional entity. In other words, our perfect line has within itself the possibility of generating an even more advanced kind of perfection, a plane.

In the Vedanta tradition of India, God is believed to be a lot like that. *Within the Divine Mind's infinite perfection*, the argument goes, *It must have within Itself the possibility of growing and becoming more perfect. If that were not the case, It would be static—and static states stagnate*.⁶

From this perspective, the One Self is believed to have created the universe *out of the stuff of Itself* (i.e., out of Its own Thought), then sent highly developed *fingers of Its own Consciousness* down into that physical universe.[†] Why? Because by seeping into the myriad nooks and crannies of experience-in-matter, It creates the possibility of growth within Itself.

Life on earth is one of those crannies, and humankind—you and I—are believed to be tiny specks of Awareness, baby Consciousnesses, that are evolving as the Divine Whole evolves. Human life may be unique in its existence, but it is not alone or especially blessed. It is one of many cosmic experiments, a delicate contrivance the aim of which is to allow fledgling Consciousness to learn to deal with *existence in matter* through *immersion in matter*. And as Consciousness grows from its experience, so grows the Mind of God.

As far as the Vedic tradition is concerned, that is *why* we exist and *from whence* we came. For now, we will take it as a working hypothesis.

If this is true, Consciousness existed in some form or other at the beginning of this solar evolution. So what might it have been like for Consciousness at that time? To consider that, momentarily switch gears and entertain the following scenario.

⁶ Stating that something already perfect can become *more perfect* is certainly paradoxical, but is not at all surprising that the East would use such phraseology in talking about God. Why? Because answering with a paradox an enormously complex and subtle question, especially one that may be beyond human understanding, is a favorite tack within Eastern metaphysics. The reason why will hopefully become evident later when we talk about meditation.

[†] Again, think about what you are doing when you dream. You create out of your own thought an entire world, then you project yourself into that world to experience. It isn't a perfect parallel, but it helps take the seeming craziness out of the idea.

You have been chosen by NASA to go alone to Planet X to carry out a very important mission (you have been asked to build by hand a precision, highly intricate scientific devices at an outpost on this planet). Just before you arrive, you are told by your pilot that the planet has some idiosyncrasies. For instance, without warning gravity can change directions (you may be standing upright one moment and the next be hurtling toward the east wall). There are other little problems, but your pilot doesn't have time to fill you in on all of them before you land. As you leave the transfer ship, you realize you don't really know what to expect.

In this situation, how are you going to deal with this totally foreign environment?

Most probably, you are not going to begin by doing anything too ambitious—no ballroom dancing on the *holo-deck*, no exotic gymnastics, no power weight lifting. You will probably tether yourself to a desk; be observant; move slowly and carefully; generally get a feel for the situation before trying anything fancy.

At the beginning of the *life cycle* of this planet, that is exactly what it must have been like for completely formless Consciousness as it began to immerse itself into what it surely perceived as a truly foreign environment—*existence in matter*. Consciousness at that level⁷ and at that point was absolutely pure (allegorically, *Garden of Eden* time?), but its purity was that of an innocent—a purity born of inexperience. The prospect of existence *in a living body* was probably as strange and scary to it then as existence *without a body* is to us now. Nevertheless, the task of Awareness was to overshadow living, physical form and, in doing so, to learn to exist responsibly in matter. As such, it had waited within the "inner worlds" for the time when the planet was ready to support life.⁸ When the time was right, it infused itself into the appropriate life-form vehicles.

And what kind of life-forms might that have been?

When we think of life, we think of human life. When we think of Consciousness, we think of human Consciousness. But let's face it, the kind of existence we experience is filled with emotional and psychological complexity that would hardly be appropriate for Consciousness that was just beginning to learn about existence-in-matter.

⁷ Tradition maintains that true fledgling Consciousness first experienced on the level of the mineral kingdom for countless eons of time before moving to a point where experience through *life-forms* was appropriate. The Consciousness referred to in this section is Consciousness that has moved to that life-form point. See Footnote 10.

⁸ The *inner worlds* are believed to be levels of existence where pure *thought* has form and substance. The idea will be expanded upon later when we talk about death, after-life, and before-birth states.

Consciousness on that level needed gentle experience, experience that was not psychologically harsh. And the form that fit the bill? Consider, for a moment, the life-experience of plant-forms.⁹

Consciousness overshadowing a plant?

Don't be fooled, oh followers of Gary L. Fledgling Consciousness could learn and observe a great deal about selfless service to the whole of life through animating plant forms. After all, the plant kingdom is an integral part of the biological hierarchy of life, so much so that higher order life forms (i.e., animals) would not be able to *exist* on this planet without it. Plants and trees are the primary living organisms that convert energy in the form of sunlight into chemical energy in the form of sugars that can be used as food by animals, humans included. In the process, plants and trees convert carbon dioxide to oxygen producing almost all of the free oxygen available in the atmosphere (hence, practically all the oxygen we breathe). They are constantly cleansing the atmosphere of both human and natural pollutants; are a source of healing agents for animal forms (most of the drugs being produced by drug companies these days are chemical compounds that were found through plant research); stabilize the land by diminishing the loss of top soil due to wind and water erosion; and are instrumental in maintaining regional climatic stability. In short, the plant kingdom is very deeply involved in the selfless support of the kingdoms above it, and that tone of selflessness that has been characteristic of it since the beginning.

As far as most humans are concerned, plants do all this mindlessly, following the nature of their specie. But if Consciousness exists, and if It *had* to feel Its way into what surely must be perceived as a very foreign form of existence (i.e., life in a body), what

⁹ This is where some people become incredulous, which brings us back to the Gary Larson cartoon. Ask your average man on the street whether he thinks higher animal forms are conscious and he might . . . maybe . . . nod toward the possibility that they are. His rationale? Experience! Look into the eyes of, say, a dog, and you'll find there's contact between it and you. The animal will either wag its tail in friendly recognition or view you as a danger and try to tear your arm off. In both cases, there is no question whether the animal is aware of your presence.

But take that same man and ask him if he thinks plants are conscious and he will either look at you blankly or poke you in the shoulder and say, "You're joking, right?"

Why? Because for the most part, life-forms that don't think and act in ways that at least resemble the relatively sophisticated ways of humans are assumed not to be consciously experiencing on *any* level.

The East believes that that bit of logic is dead wrong.

better way than through the plant kingdom? Put another way, if Consciousness in its primal, baby stage had to be gently introduced to *existence in matter*, doing so through a vehicle in which there was not the personal and psychological stresses we humans deal with daily would be paramount. Consciousness just starting out would need an environment in which personalized goals and interests were absent. Unemotional, selfless service to the rest of life would be ideal, which is exactly how the plant kingdom is oriented. In short, if Consciousness *had* to expand into matter as a life-form, there is no more appropriate way for it to have started.

In reality, I've painted a relatively simple picture of the vehicle-forms we call "plants," at least as far as it is depicted in the Vedic tradition. If their view is accurate, plants have a number of levels of Consciousness working through them—everything from the primitive Awareness associated with their atomic structures¹⁰ to the Awareness that comes with the cooperative efforts of the cellular units to the higher Consciousness that overshadows and animates the whole into a coherent unit. In Sanskrit, these more evolved Awarenesses, these overshadowing Consciousnesses, are called *devas*, and they make up and support what is called the *devic kingdom*.¹¹

Consciousness on this level acts a lot like Emerson's *oversoul*. It is *undifferentiated*, a truly whole self. There are billions and billions of petunias, for instance; the Consciousness that animates one could—most probably does—animate all. And because this level of Consciousness is just beginning to immerse Itself in matter, Its

¹⁰ Atoms being conscious? It could be worse: The first time I heard someone claim that people from India believe rocks are alive was in my seventh grade history class. The idea seemed preposterous and, being a typical twelve-year old kid, I derived a considerable amount of mirth from the thought.

Though I wasn't at all aware of it at the time, neither my text nor my teacher were particularly enlightened when it came to understanding Eastern traditions. *Of course rocks aren't alive*. They don't breathe; they don't reproduce; they don't do any of the processes scientists require of living things. But that misses the mark completely. What the Eastern tradition really maintains is that rocks are *conscious*, and although that probably sounds just as weird, it isn't.

If God's Thought—Its Consciousness in action—is the basis of all that exists, then there is not anything that is not a part of God's Consciousness. If that is true, there is nothing that is not conscious on some level. The Awareness wrapped up in the existence of a rock is not anything like the developed Awareness wrapped up in a human being, but that doesn't necessarily mean Awareness in its seedling state doesn't exist there; It may mean we simply aren't together enough to recognize it.

¹¹ A belief in the devic kingdom is not restricted to India. One of its most graphic depictions comes from the American Indians when they called the consciousnesses of nature *Nature Spirits* . . .

link to the Whole of life has not diminished . . . It is still aware of Its oneness with the Divine Mind.

With time, that Consciousness on this level will begin to differentiate in the sense that parts of itself—the part, for example, associated with the petunias in just South America—will begin to focus more into the specific experiences that are available in South America. And as that differentiation begins to happen, each of the parts of the self will begin to recede to some degree from the whole. Thus begins the path to experiencing of individualized pieces, each a unit unto itself.

There is a limit to the experience Consciousness can accrue from its association with plant forms. The next logical step would be to move into vehicles that could allow It a more evolved "awakening" into matter. That, as far as this scenario is concerned, is exactly what animal forms do. Fitted with limited brains, instincts, mobility, and providing an immense range of embodiments from the one celled amoebae to the mammal that acts as companion to man (Marmaduke and *el pussy gato*), animal-forms allow Consciousness to expand even further into existence and experience within matter.

On the lower animal levels, Consciousness-when-in-matter still acts like an oversoul, experiencing simultaneously through large numbers of physical vehicles at once. But as It grows into the necessity to experience in more complex ways, Consciousness begins to compartmentalize. It does so by naturally dividing over time into individualized units, each of which concerns Itself with the rich experiences of fewer yet more-highly-ordered animal vehicles apiece. And as each narrows its focus, at least while in a body, each draws Its immediate awareness *away from all else* . . . It begins to feel *separate* within the Whole.

Up to this point, Consciousness has animated and experienced through forms that do not question or dispute the natural forces that shaped their existence. It has acted like an observer, growing in awareness as It rides through life. Its presence has been the light within the eye of the form, but It has not been the form nor has it become so absorbed in the experiences of the form that it has completely forgotten Its link to the Whole.

When it becomes time for Consciousness to step through the gateway separating animals from humans, all that changes. It has differentiated to the point where the kinds of experience It needs to continue to grow require isolation. Now, when animating a

body, a part of Itself must be allowed to so completely meld with its single vehicle that It all but forgets its link to God.

We'll talk more about what humankind is shortly. There is one last parting shot, though. In this view, the consciousness we associate with ourselves is not at the top of the ladder. All we have talked about so far has been Awareness that is considerably less immersed in matter and, hence, considerably less evolved in the ways of existence-in-matter. What is important to understand is that just as there is Consciousness at these relatively less developed levels, there are believed to be Consciousnesses that are so far beyond anything we could even imagine that it would boggle the mind to try.

Example: Many ancient peoples believed that the Sun was a great Being. Modern science naturally scoffs at such primitive ideas. After all, we know a lot about the Sun's composition and the fusion process that allows it to provide our world with energy, etc. But ignoring science for the moment, does it make sense to automatically assume there is no Consciousness at the heart of that body?

We can answer that by answering another question: If a Being were given the task of overseeing and nurturing the development of an entire evolution of "lesser" Beings—Beings like ourselves—would one expect that Being to embody a physical form that was man-like?

The answer to that is surely "no". Our body-type is excellent for the kind of experiences we seem to be learning to deal with here on Earth, but for a higher Being with truly cosmic responsibilities, human form would surely be too limiting.

Put in an altogether different context, a very ancient context, if there is a purpose to life—if there is a God or Divine Mind or whatever—and if there is a spiritual evolution going on in the universe in general and our solar system in particular, would you not expect to find a guardian at the center of that evolution—a nurturing, supporting Being that was One with that infinitely loving, creative, always expanding Consciousness we call God?

And when that great, benevolent Being took up physical embodiment, one that would allow It to bathe Its charges in the Light of Its presence, what kind of a form might It take?

As an ancient Egyptian-inspired poem suggests:

Even as the Sun, the eternal, shines forever,

*From His Light grow the worlds;
So the lighted soul reflects that mighty One,
Whose Light shall create and renew the lives of men.*

Without our star, we would not be here. Neither would our planet, nor any of the others. Our world and our presence exists by the grace of our star. It upholds us completely.

Are stars the embodiment of Beings far beyond anything man could imagine? Who can say? But you can see why many in the ancient world might have thought so. And if they were right, what a wonder the night sky reveals . . . all those stars . . . all that Consciousness. How immense the mind of God.