Science, Consciousness and—dare I say it?—God

By Peter Russell, M.A., D.C.S.

Peter Russell, a fellow at the Institute of Noetic Science, was invited to give the opening speech at the First International Conference on Science and Consciousness, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April 1999. His words still have relevance today.

That this topic is being extensively discussed shows that the science of consciousness has at last come of age. But I think few people realize where it may be taking us. I believe it will eventually lead us to a new understanding of God.

Now, notions of God don’t go down very well in scientific circles. Paul Davies has written that science has looked out to the edges of the universe to deep space; into deep time, to the beginning of the universe; and into deep structure, to the basic level of the quantum. And science is proud to proclaim that it has found no need or place for God. The universe works perfectly well without any divine agent. Science has nicely gotten rid of God, thank you very much. But so far they have ignored an equally important fourth area of study—that of the mind. I don’t think any great spiritual teacher ever said God would be found out there at the edge of the universe.

If God is to be found anywhere it is deep within ourselves, at the core of our own beings.

Science is now just beginning to explore the nature of consciousness, and we are still a very long way from understanding what we might call “deep mind.” But I believe that when we delve into deep mind as fully as we have delved into deep space, deep time and deep structure, then we will discover what the great spiritual teachers have been talking about for thousands of years. Science is going to find itself unwittingly having to explore the very topic it has so strenuously avoided for centuries.

Interestingly, when you look out into deep space, deep time and deep structure, you don’t find consciousness, either. Consciousness is a huge problem for science. And yet it is the one thing that none of us can deny. We are conscious; we have experiences. We all experience being in this room. We may be having slightly different
experiences of the room, we may even doubt the validity of some of our experiences, but we cannot doubt that we are experiencing beings. And yet there is nothing in the Western scientific worldview that predicts that we, or any other living being, should have any mental experiences. Given that we do, there is no way of accounting for it. Christian de Quincey, from the Institute of Noetic Sciences, calls this the paradox of consciousness: Scientists are walking around every day with the indisputable fact of their own consciousness, and with absolutely no way of explaining it.

David Chalmers, philosophy professor at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, calls this the “hard problem” of science. The relatively easy problems—and they are not actually that easy at all—are how the brain functions. Answering these questions will still take many years of dedicated research. But even if we do eventually understand the detailed workings of the brain, there will still remain the really hard problem as to how something as unconscious as matter can give ever rise to something as immaterial as consciousness. That’s the hard problem. But I think it is not so much a hard problem as an impossible problem. Impossible, that is, within the current scientific paradigm.

I believe the exploration of consciousness is going to force us to make a radical revision of the current scientific worldview. Let’s just recall for a moment what happened in a classic example of a paradigm shift, the Copernican Revolution. At that time, everyone believed the Earth was still and the stars revolved around it. It seemed obvious. All you had to do was look out at the sky to see the sun going around each day, while the ground beneath your feet remained perfectly still. But there was a problem with this model. The planets did not move smoothly around the Earth, they wandered amongst the other stars. Trying to account for the planets’ movements led to a whole series of complicated theories. Copernicus realized it was much easier to explain these anomalies if the Earth were moving through space. However, this not only contradicted common sense, it also went dead against the religious orthodoxy, so he kept his ideas to himself till just before he died. Later, Galileo looked through his telescope and saw that Copernicus was right. But the Vatican put him under house arrest for the rest of his life to keep him from talking about this heresy. It was not until 150 years after Copernicus that Newton worked out the mathematical equations of planets orbiting the sun and proved the new Copernican paradigm to be correct.

I believe we are entering a similar process with regard to our understanding of consciousness—except that the paradigm shift is going to be even more profound. Paradigms pertain to a particular science, but what is at stake here is the whole scientific worldview, the paradigm that lies behind all our scientific paradigms. This I call the superparadigm of modern science. In essence it states that the material world of space, time and matter is the real world. The big problem for this worldview is consciousness itself. As I said before, consciousness is absolutely undeniable, and also completely inexplicable. As far as the current superparadigm is concerned, consciousness is one big anomaly.

The way that Western science has dealt with the problem of consciousness has followed the pattern outlined by Thomas Kuhn, who coined the term “paradigm shift.” The first thing science did was ignore it—and for seemingly good reasons. First, you can’t measure consciousness; it doesn’t fit into the methods of science. Second, science has tried to be objective, eliminating the variables of subjective experience. And third, our understanding of the universe seems to work perfectly well without consciousness. So why bother?

But things have changed. Quantum physics has shown that consciousness may affect the reality we observe. In medicine there are many cases where the effect of attention or intention can promote healing, including the remote healing of other people. And there is a growing body of research of the brain that begs the
question “What is consciousness, and how does it relate to the material world?”

Since consciousness can no longer be ignored, science has moved into the second phase—that of trying to incorporate the anomaly within the existing paradigm. Francis Crick thinks consciousness is all to do with neuropeptides. Some believe the answers will be found in quantum coherence in the tiny microtubules found in nerve cells. Others think it has something to do with chaos and complexity theory. There are lots of interesting theories, but none of them say how any brain activity, quantum or otherwise, could ever give rise to a mental experience.

We are at a stage reminiscent of the medieval astronomers who kept trying to account for planetary movements with ever more cumbersome models, trying to fit them into the exiting paradigm. All our attempts to account for consciousness are doing so within a superparadigm that is essentially materialist in nature. Richard Dawkins, who popularized the idea of the “selfish gene,” reflected this attitude at a recent talk in London when he said, “I cannot explain consciousness. No scientist I know of can explain consciousness. However, I have no doubt that we eventually will be able to explain consciousness.”

I believe we will never be able to explain consciousness—not within the current superparadigm, at least. Eventually science will be forced to adopt a completely different model of reality; one in which consciousness is as fundamental as space, time and matter—perhaps even more fundamental.

Before continuing any further, I should explain what I mean by consciousness. In English, the word consciousness is used in many different ways, leading to a lot of confusion. We talk of someone who is awake as conscious, but not someone who is asleep. Yet a sleeping person may dream, and those dreams are mental experiences—events in consciousness. Some claim that only human beings are conscious, meaning that only human beings have self-consciousness. But a dog surely has experience; it isn’t a biological robot. If we didn’t think dogs had experiences we wouldn’t give them anesthetics during operations.

When I speak of consciousness, I am referring to the faculty of consciousness—the capacity to have mental experiences. This is not something unique to human beings. I believe dogs have this faculty, and so do dolphins, horses, cats and birds. So where do you draw the line? How far down the evolutionary tree does consciousness go? The classic view is that some form of nervous system is necessary. This is because the materialist superparadigm says that consciousness emerges from the world of space, time and matter, and needs some nervous system or something to create it. But if we shift to a model in which consciousness is a universal faculty, then maybe a nervous system is merely a particular amplifier of experience, or helps the experiences to take shape.

I think consciousness goes all the way down—down to simple cells, even to pure, simple atoms. The normal objection to this proposal is that it implies rocks must have experiences, thoughts and feelings like human beings do. But it doesn’t mean that at all. Maybe what goes
on in the consciousness of a cell is one billionth of the richness of our experience; if so, then what goes on in the consciousness of a rock may be one billionth times fainter still. Virtually nothing compared to us, but not absolutely nothing.

Now, there are fascinating parallels between consciousness and light. Even in everyday language we speak of the Inner Light, the light of consciousness. St. John spoke of the light which lighteth every mind that came into the world. Just as consciousness is a big anomaly for the current scientific paradigm, so is light. Light moves at the same speed relative to all observers. No matter how fast you go, light will overtake you and go 186,000 miles/second faster. Even if you accelerated yourself to 185,999 miles/second, it would go 186,000 miles/second faster, not 1 mile/second faster. It was this anomaly that led Einstein to his famous Special Theory of Relativity. This predicts that the closer you approach the speed of light, the slower your clocks run, and the shorter your measurements of length. This goes completely against common sense, but it turns out that, in this instance, it is common sense that is wrong. Atomic clocks have been flown around the world, and they do indeed slow down by the predicted amount.

You have probably heard that nothing can ever travel at the speed of light. The reason is that mass increases with speed, and at the speed of light an object’s mass would become infinite, and it would take more than all the energy in the universe to accelerate the object up to light speed. But light travels at the speed of light, by definition, and the reason it can is that it always has zero mass. Einstein’s equations predict that from light’s own point of view time has stopped, and distance has shrunk to zero. So all light knows is now. It doesn’t exist in time and space as we do. Light, somehow, lies beyond the world of space, time and matter. It is not part of the material world.

The same could be said of consciousness. It seems to have no mass. And according to the mystics, who have delved into the nature of their own consciousness, time and space disappear when you get down to the deepest levels of consciousness. Saint Augustin said, “He who knows the Truth knows that Light, and he who knows it knows eternity.” And Emerson said, “Time and space are but the physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light.”

So I think there is more to this than verbal parallels. It seems to me that light is the first level of manifestation, both in the physical realm and the realm of mind. Immediately the phrase “God is Light” comes to mind. I think there may be more to this than we at first suppose. Mystics the world over have repeatedly claimed two things. First, that the true nature of the self is pure consciousness, the light of consciousness. And second, that the self is also identical with God.

Of course, saying that “I am God” doesn’t go down well in most cultures. When the German mystic Meister Eckhart said, “I am God,” or “I and God are One,” the Vatican told him to recant. You can say you have the experience of God but not that you are God. But when the mystic says, “I am God,” he is not talking of the individual self, not the ego which identifies itself with things like, “I am Peter Russell, I am British, I am male, I think these thoughts, etc., etc.” What they are really saying is that the pure self, the most fundamental level of our being, is God. In other words, God is consciousness—not consciousness of any particular thing, but the very faculty of consciousness that is present in all things. As Ramana Maharshi said, “I Am is the name of God. God is none other than the self.” Or, in the words of a Sufi mystic, “When thou knowest thine own existence, then thou knowest God.”

This is where we end up once we start investigating the true nature of consciousness. Although science doesn’t realize it, once it embarks upon this exploration and begins to delve into deep mind, it is going to find itself confronting the one thing it has avoided and denied for so long—the nature of God.

Peter Russell is an author and public speaker who is recognized as one of the leading thinkers on consciousness and contemporary spirituality. His books include The Global Brain, Waking Up in Time, and From Science to God, and his video, The Global Brain, has won international acclaim. Peter believes that the critical challenge today is to free human thinking from the limited beliefs and attitudes that lie behind so many of our problems—personal, social and global. His mission is to distill the essential wisdom on human consciousness found in the world’s various spiritual traditions, and to disseminate their teachings on self-liberation in contemporary and compelling ways. Visit his website: perr Russell.com. View article resources and author information here: pathways to familywellness.org/references.html.