

Letters to the Editor

Consciousness and Substance: The Primal Forms of God

To the Editor:

In his Guest Editorial in Volume 6, Number 3 of this Journal, John White (1987) has warned seekers of enlightenment about what they should not do, but has not said what they should. I wish he had.

Another matter to which I wish to draw attention is his statement, citing Da Love-Ananda, that there is a nonphysical reality (Being or God) that is uncaused and infinite and is the source of all that there is.

How can we be sure that this is a fact? White has not tried to substantiate his observation. But in the major Hindu philosophical systems, with which he seems to be familiar, there are several arguments in favor of it. One may be cited. Stated briefly, we can know the world of objects only through the responses of our senses to them. Said another way, all the qualities of whatever we perceive are our "creations." So, if we can know the world of objects by some means other than the senses, we shall be able to perceive it in its "pure state," without any qualities, the "reality behind appearance." This is called "direct" or "unmediated" knowledge.

A technique that all the major schools of Hindu philosophy recommend for the purpose of obtaining direct knowledge is the practice of yoga as systematized by Patanjali (Bernard, 1958). As can be seen from some of the procedures described by him, particularly withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), and contemplation (*dhyana*), they are aimed at reducing or helping the practitioner to ignore, to the extent possible, the input of information to the brain from internal and external sources: physical sensations, thoughts, imagery, out-of-body experiences, and so on.

If the practitioner succeeds in this effort, what follows, stated briefly and simply is this: as one is not conscious of events in the physical environment nor of psychological events, one loses awareness of the passage of time. In other words, time stands still for the practitioner.

(In the Hindu philosophical tradition it is held that the notion of time derives from the awareness of succession of events.) Further, with no awareness of any mental or physical objects, including one's own body, the practitioner has no sense of a boundary that separates him or her from the environment.

This experience is sometimes described in terms such as being infinite, merging with the cosmos, or losing distinction between self and nonself. The practitioner feels he or she is fully conscious but, paradoxically, not aware who is the subject or what is the object in this state of consciousness. "Pure consciousness," "unconditional being," and "existence without qualities" are some of the terms used in attempts to describe this state of consciousness. The practitioner feels he or she just is, or is just "being." In the technical terminology of Patanjali's yoga, it is the ultimate state of contemplation (*samaadhi*).

Interestingly, many experiencers, though not all, when they try to describe this experience, which I shall henceforth call mystical experience, give the impression that it has a quality of radiance. A common image used is "a thousand suns." White himself refers to the Self = Being = Ultimate Reality as the "Radiant Transcendental Being" (White, 1987, p. 75). Could the bright light reported by many near-death experiencers be a variant of this phenomenon?

Now, how does one ascertain that "pure being" is indeed the ultimate reality and not a unique kind of hallucination (Bharati, 1977, p. 84), or a hallucination of radiance? I submit that this possibility has to be considered, since the brain, when starved of input, is known to respond in different ways, one of them being creation of its own input in the form of hallucinations.

No doubt a number of people who have had the mystical experience have said that they felt utterly convinced that "pure being" is the ultimate reality and they were identical with it. But conviction alone does not necessarily imply truth; their conviction may have been the result of their belief or expectation.

I say this on the basis of my own mystical experience. It occurred about five years ago, out of the blue, without my working for it, and it was a full-blown one. I have since deeply thought about its alleged metaphysical implications, but I find no reason to think that it is anything more than an exceedingly delightful experience. It gave me an idea of what is sought to be conveyed by the term "unconditional being," but I do not think I can make any ontological claims on the basis of my experience. There are other experiencers who hold the same opinion. A notable example is Agehananda Bharati (1977). He has also cited some ancient Hindu and Buddhist teachers in support of his view.

Several experiencers have observed that their mystical experience has brought about a positive change in their life attitudes, such as a reduction of materialistic concerns or a decrease in the fear of death. It may be asked why such transformations follow upon the mystical experience if there is nothing special about it. But do positive changes always occur? It seems that they do not (Bharati, 1977). When they do take place, I think one reason may well be the belief or expectation of the experiencer that change will follow. As is known from evaluative studies of the effects of transcendental meditation, for example, belief and expectation are powerful factors capable of modifying behavior (West, 1986, p. 249).

It is also possible that the mystical experience, particularly if it recurs several times, and the procedures such as meditation prescribed for achieving it, may cause modifications in body chemistry as well as in other respects (Mandell, 1980), and thus effect deep-rooted behavior changes. It seems to me that few subjects of the mystical experience, or writers on the subject, have given any thought to this factor. I would suggest investigating the value changes reported by near-death experiencers in this light.

Finally, assuming that there is an ultimate reality of the kind reported by subjects of the mystical experience, why is it spoken of in reverential terms? If the ultimate reality were to be discovered in the physicist's laboratory, would it be regarded in the same way?

References

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