

# Realms of Consciousness and the Real

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**In our post-Enlightenment world, reality has been reduced to only that which can be known through the faculty of reason, or empirically verified by the five senses; all higher levels of knowing have virtually been banished. Current approaches to psychotherapy have failed to discern that, without a proper understanding of the mind in all its dimensions, any discussion about effective mental health is not even possible. This paper seeks to demonstrate that certain pernicious limitations in modern Western psychology today have served to distort our understanding of consciousness. This, in turn, has undermined our ability to deliver efficacious mental health treatment, where every dimension of a human being is taken into account.**

*Man is in this world already in heaven or hell.*

– Jakob Böhme (quoted in Hartmann 1891, 292)

*Samsara, the transmigration of life, takes place in one's own mind. Let one therefore keep the mind pure, for what a man thinks that he becomes: this is a mystery of Eternity.*

– Maitrī Upanishad 6:24

*The manifestations of mind outnumber the / myriads of dust-motes / In the infinite rays of sunlight.*

– Milarepa (1977, 97)

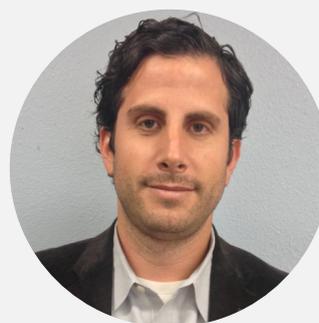
*The whole world of existence is imagination within imagination.*

– Ibn 'Arabī (quoted in Izutsu 1984, 7)

## 1 Introduction

While modern Western psychology has, occasionally, acknowledged the importance of the transpersonal realm and other dimensions of reality, it nevertheless remains afflicted by a reductionist *Weltanschauung* that thwarts its clinical efficacy and treatment modalities. We are reminded that *“the materialistic consensus which undergirds practically all of current mainstream psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy of mind is fundamentally flawed [note: and that] current mainstream opinion in psychology must change”* (Kelly et al. 2010, xiii, xiv). By contrast, holistic psychologies rooted in the spiritual traditions have fuller access to the realm of consciousness – in the multiplicity of its forms – along with their corresponding epistemological modes. Across the world's religions, “Mind” is the source of all things because it exists prior to the created order and pervades all of reality.

The life of the mind is often taken for granted and when a thought enters it, without fully realizing its power, we can find ourselves propelled into very confused and dark spaces. The basis of a thought's validity is seldom considered any more. The notion that because thoughts arise, they must somehow reflect reality, is very deceptive and can in most cases be totally false. If a thought has no foundation in what is real, then what is the point of occupying our minds with it? Yet, our ordinary minds are disconnected from their centers, such that what is higher within them is lost to the onslaught of mental “white noise” that we all generate.



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For most people in the present day, the consciousness that we inhabit is not a friendly one; rather, it betrays a myriad of hostilities that serve to undermine our vision of the transpersonal Self. In such cases, our mind is our worst enemy. By means of the contemplative practices found in humanity's spiritual traditions, we can glean ways of grounding our thoughts and emotions in our moment-to-moment experience through an abiding connection to the sacred. Without a "vertical" perspective on the metaphysical basis of consciousness, we will become captive to the fragmented excrescences of our cognition. To ignore this is, in a sense, to throw ourselves out to sea in the midst of a storm, the consequences of which can be deleterious to our psychological well-being.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that modern Western psychology has failed to understand the enigma of consciousness due to its reductionist assumptions and its uncritical reliance on Cartesian bifurcationism. A proposed remedy for this failure is to adopt a proper "science of the soul," which is found in all of the world's religions, where the sacred remains pivotal to an authentic understanding of the person. A comparative methodology grounded in epistemological pluralism has been used to critically examine the claims of modern psychology in light of the deeper insights found across humanity's spiritual cultures.

## 2 Consciousness and Modern Psychology

The genesis of the desacralized and reductionist outlook that dominates psychology today is likely to be found in the ideas of John Locke (1632–1704), one of the most influential thinkers of the European Enlightenment. To him was attributed the theory of empiricism and the associated notion of *tabula rasa*, whereby human beings are considered to be born with a "clean slate" or "blank canvas" rather than being an image of the Divine. The foundations of modern psychology – especially behaviorism and psychoanalysis – need to be understood for what they are: namely, an unbridled assault on what it means to be fully human. Any so-called psychology that abolishes the soul and Spirit, and regards the mind or consciousness as a mere epiphenomenon, is not a true "science of the soul." In the winter of 1913, John B. Watson (1878–1958), known as the "father of behaviorism," delivered a lecture at Columbia University entitled *Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It*, which became widely known as the "behaviorist manifesto." This address inaugurated one of the most powerful currents in 20th-century psychology.

Watson's (1913, 163, 177) attack on the "science of the soul" is usefully encapsulated as follows:

*The time seems to have come when psychology must discard all reference to consciousness; when it need no longer delude itself into thinking that it is making mental states the object of observation... This suggested elimination of states of consciousness as proper objects of investigation in themselves will remove the barrier from psychology which exists between it and the other [note: modern] sciences.*

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), who developed the psychoanalytic "talking cure" and laid the foundations for the discipline of modern psychology, also had a reductionistic interpretation of the mind (1963, 144):

*[T]he 'essential nature' of consciousness: we see the process of a thing becoming conscious as a specific psychical act, distinct from and independent of the process of the formation of a presentation or idea; and we regard consciousness as a sense organ which perceives data that arise elsewhere.*

Although Freud's one-time protégé, Carl Jung (1875–1961), is often considered a pioneer of transpersonal psychology who recognized the need to include the spiritual dimension in psychology. Nevertheless, his own interpretation of consciousness is limited to the empirical ego and does not encompass anything that is transcendent to it: "Consciousness is the function or activity which maintains the relation of psychic contents with the ego" (Jung 1923, 536); or "Consciousness can only exist through continual recognition of the unconscious" (1980, 96).

In this context, Cyril Burt (1883–1971) offers this assessment of the discipline: "Psychology, having first bargained away its soul and then gone out of its mind, seems now, as it faces an untimely end, to have lost all consciousness" (1962, 229). Since its emergence, modern Western psychology has not been able to establish a healthy epistemological pluralism to support both the ordinary and transpersonal dimensions of mind, seeing as it has abandoned its roots in metaphysics and spiritual principles. When souls are living in a state of forgetfulness, their consciousness is obscured. This prevents them from truly knowing themselves, as they fail to see that the endless stream of thoughts in the mind has an ontological status that is only contingent or provisional. What is required for a proper and abiding psychological orientation is to stabilize one's psychic center, by having it anchored in a reality that is transmundane.

### 3 “As Above, So Below”

According to traditional thought, the macrocosm and microcosm mirror each other. This is conveyed in the Hermetic maxim: “*In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below*” (quoted in Burckhardt 1986, 196). All levels of reality exist both within and outside us given our fundamental unity in the Absolute. According to Islamic spirituality, “*Man is a little cosmos, and the cosmos is like a big man*” (quoted in Ibn ‘Arabī 1975, 11).

Not only are we in the cosmos, but the cosmos dwells in us. Similarly, there is a correspondence between the soul and the cosmos, including our posthumous states and consciousness in this life. For in the deepest recesses of the human microcosm there reverberates another world – more real and enduring than this one, yet fully present, here and now, at the very heart of existence. As Muhammad is recorded to have said: “*Paradise is closer to you than the thong of your sandal, and the same applies to hell*” (quoted in Eaton 1985, 110). The Divine is an irreducible whole that cannot be artificially sundered into disjointed parts – every dimension of existence reflects the whole of Reality, and each realm of cognition is permeable to the whole.

If we pay attention to our minds and their fluctuating states, we can see how much of our experience in this life is susceptible to momentary cognitions. Although we cannot underestimate the power of consciousness, we need to also emphasize that “*Mind is indeed the source of bondage and also the source of liberation*” (Maitrī Upanishad 6:24). Indeed, the tradition of Vedānta – one of the six “perspectives” (Sa. *darśana*) of Hindu philosophy – teaches that the “mind” (Sa. *manas*) according to the Vedānta is the by-product of “illusion” (Sa. *māyā*).

The mind cannot know itself through its own efforts, as it requires the agency of what lies beyond the empirical ego in order to do so. Just like the “ordinary” self, consciousness itself cannot be understood at its own level – this is a fundamental issue with which the discipline of modern Western psychology has yet to grapple. Our minds create a dream-like reality that can appear to be quite vivid and all-encompassing, but this is a chimera. In such a state, we are captured by distorting mental fragments that prevent us from discerning the whole, which is why we are often apt to be deceived. For this reason, the life of the mind can become a quagmire of distress and confusion.

It ought to be obvious that existence, as a whole, cannot simply be reduced to the functions of our precarious cognition. So, while the mind is unable to create reality as such, our perspective on life can still have a powerful impact on our psycho-physical flourishing. The endemic relativism that has undermined the discipline of modern Western psychology is underscored by American psychologist Carl Rogers (1902–1987): “*The only reality I can possibly know is the world as I perceive and experience it at this moment... And the only certainty is that those perceived realities are different. There are as many ‘real worlds’ as there are people!*” (1995, 102). A similar view was held by Freud (1989, 217): “*Fundamentally, we find only what we need and see only what we want to see.*”

By expunging the very notion of truth, we become imprisoned in a solipsistic *cul-de-sac*. As the New Age mantra proclaims: “*You create your own reality*” (Watkins 2006, 41). For this reason, the French metaphysician René Guénon (1886–1951) observed that an experience of existence that excludes higher orders of reality can only give rise to “*The Illusion of ‘Ordinary Life’*” (2004, 101).

Our thinking about the world and ourselves is rooted in our state of mind, which is situated in a particular individual perspective. This varies, from moment to moment, in each person. Our thoughts can also conflict among themselves. Without an awareness of this, our attention is often diffused outwardly into the world, and we lose touch with our sacred center – which is a direct reflection of Reality. It is through a comprehensive “science of the soul,” as taught by spiritual traditions, that we can distinguish the psychic from the Spiritual, as well as the relative from the Absolute. According to the Māndūkya Upanishad (1:1:4): “*Two kinds of knowledge must be known – that is what the knowers of Brahman tell us. They are the Higher Knowledge and the lower knowledge.*” This discrimination cannot be found in modern Western psychology, as it has rejected its metaphysical and spiritual foundations.

### 4 Liberation and Bondage

Throughout all spiritual traditions, we find examples of how both heaven and hell – and everything in between – are present within the human psyche. The Anglican divine William Law (1686–1761) writes: “*There cannot be the smallest Thing, or the smallest Quality of any Thing in this World, but what is a Quality of Heaven or Hell, discovered under a temporal Form*” (1893, 116). The English poet John Milton (1608–1674) confirmed this in his famous poem, *Paradise Lost*: “*The mind is*

*its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven*" (1895, 33).

The Māndūkya Upanishad describes four "states" (Sa. *avasthā*) of consciousness that are central to human beings: "waking" (Sa. *jāgrat*), "dreaming" (Sa. *svapna*), "deep sleep" (Sa. *sushupti*), and the underlying substratum of all three states corresponding to the gross, subtle, and causal realms (Sa. *turiya*). The "Self" (Sa. *Ātmā*) is the principle of all states of consciousness and all degrees of its manifestation. It is important to note that the perspective of modern Western psychology begins and ends with the waking state of consciousness; meaning that all facets of life are analyzed from the waking state, with other realms being, for the most part, disqualified as they cannot be empirically verified.

Contrary to the belief that "*the psyche is a self-regulating system that maintains its equilibrium*" (Jung 1985, 153), what we find, in fact, is that consciousness alone regulates all levels of a human being. A "science of the soul," grounded in metaphysics and ontology, sees the waking state as a relative point of reference; not one that is absolute. For this reason, it can account for multiple realms of consciousness. In Sāṅkhya–Yoga, we find the cosmological principles of the three *gunas* and their psychic correspondences: "*When 'sattva' predominates, consciousness is calm, clear, comprehensible, virtuous; dominated by 'rajas,' it is agitated, uncertain, unstable; overwhelmed by 'tamas,' it is dark, confused, passionate, bestial*" (Eliade 1973, 23).

In Buddhist cosmology, there are six realms that constitute life in *samsāra* (Sa. the cycle of birth-and-death): hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, fighting spirits, and gods. If we conceive of these worlds – not only as posthumous states that we experience after death – but as realms in which we can become immersed here and now, we can better understand not only the nature of the mind, but also extreme cognitive states and their relationship to mental health. By having recourse to a proper metaphysical perspective, we can make sense of the well-known insight by Ādi Śankara, the eighth-century sage of the Advaita Vedānta tradition: "*There is in reality no transmigrating soul different from the Lord*" (1962, 51).

## 5 Toward a Multidimensional Model of Consciousness

Beyond the corporeal and psychic realms, traditional forms of wisdom maintain that human beings can occupy multiple states of consciousness. Buddhist writer Marco Pallis (1895–1989) explains: "*Man is but one of an indefinite number of states of the being*" (1949, 127). William James (1842–1910), the "Father of American Psychology," notes a similar idea (1985, 388):

*[O]ur normal waking consciousness... is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness... No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question... At any rate, they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality.*

The sacred psychologies of diverse cultures, throughout the world, provide us with a context for understanding these other states of mind. Due to their limited scope, empirical epistemologies fail to discern these realms of consciousness, as they only take into account "horizontal" dimensions of reality. We are reminded that "*Heaven or Hell... comprise regions and degrees—in both the 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimensions—but the 'life' or 'movements' in these abodes cannot be penetrated by earthly understanding, unless it be through rare and fragmentary images*" (Schuon 1970, 139). For this reason, Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993) points out (1994, 6–7):

*Such a vision of reality, however, is not accessible to human consciousness as long as it remains at the level of ordinary everyday experience. In order to have access to it... the mind must experience a total transformation of itself. The consciousness must transcend the dimension of ordinary cognition where the world of being is experienced as consisting of solid, self-subsistent things, each having as its ontological core what is called essence. There must arise in the mind a totally different kind of awareness in which the world is revealed in an entirely different light.*

That at any given moment we are in a particular state of mind or realm of consciousness, including extreme states, does not mean that they are not real. They can be just as vivid as our experiences in the external world of matter –

seeing as all realms coexist in reality – but it must be remembered that our current temporal existence is subject to impermanence and countless vicissitudes. No matter how real the contents of the mind may appear, they are grounded in an order of reality that is individual and highly conditioned, rather than in the transpersonal.

## 6 Cognition and the Real

Our cognition is instrumental in traversing the multifarious states of consciousness and can act as a support to the spiritual path when rooted in a sacred ambiance. This is attested to in the Ashtāvakra Gītā of the Hindu tradition: “*You are what you think*” (1990, 3); in a Buddhist text, the Dhammapada: “*All that we are is the result of what we have thought*” (1965, 3); in Jewish scripture: “*As he thinketh in his heart, so is he*” (Proverbs 23:7); in the New Testament: “*We... beholding... are changed into the same image*” (2 Corinthians 3:18); and in the Islamic tradition: “*You are your thought*” (Rūmī 1983, 96). Both a horizontal and vertical understanding of existence are needed to fully grasp the nuances of the human psyche, yet mainstream psychology, for the most part, confines itself to a purely secular outlook.

Without opening the “eye of the heart” (Lat. *intellectus*) we cannot discern the true nature of reality. According to the Bhagavad Gītā (2:16): “*The unreal never is: the Real never is not. This truth indeed has been seen by those who can see the true.*” In the same way that a Hindu proverb speaks of a “*rope... mistaken for an illusory snake*” (quoted in *The Māndūkya Upanisad with Gaudapāda’s Kārikā and Śankara’s Commentary* 1949, 71), human beings superimpose a separate ego onto the transpersonal Self, giving rise to a plethora of confusion and suffering. For this reason, discernment is essential for our mental health.

Time and time again, spiritual traditions call us to “*remember that thou goest in the midst of snares*” (Ecclesiasticus 9:13). In Plato’s (429–347) allegory of the cave, people mistake shadows for the real world. The experience of being shackled in a cave can be likened to a psychosis of delusional thinking or hallucinations about the reality of the shadows in our minds. To face the real world beyond the “cave” requires entering a spiritual path, in order to restore true vision through the “eye of the heart.” From the aspect of ultimate reality, we need to “see through” the phenomenal world of fleeting appearances, so as to behold the transpersonal order (quoted in Osborne 1978, 91):

*It is like a cinema show. There is light on the screen and the shadows flitting across impress the audience as the acting of some story. Now suppose that in this film story an audience is also shown on the screen. The seer and the seen will then both be on the screen. Apply this to yourself. You are the screen, the Self has created the ego, the ego has its accretions of thoughts, which are displayed as the world, trees, plants, etc., about which you are asking. In reality all these are nothing but the Self. If you see the Self it will be found to be all, everywhere and always. Nothing but the Self exists.*

From this metaphysical perspective, we can understand the Buddha when he remarked “*Our life is the creation of our mind*” (1973, 35). The eighth-century Buddhist yogi, Saraha, observed that “*Mind is the seed of everything, from which sprouts both [note: samsāra] and nirvāna*” (quoted in *Buddhist Scriptures* 2004, 482). The Sage of Arunachala, Śrī Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), explains: “*You carry heaven and hell with you*” (Maharshi 1996, 46). John Smith (1618–1652), one of the Cambridge Platonists, writes: “*The foundation of heaven and hell is laid in men’s own souls*” (1859, 151). Boethius (480–525) stated: “*Nothing is miserable unless you think it so; and on the other hand, nothing brings happiness unless you are content with it*” (2002, 24). Within the Jewish tradition, this insight is framed as “*A man is shown in a dream only what is suggested by his own thoughts*” (*The Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot* 1948, 341–342). The Persian poet Sanā’ī (d. 1131) expressed this thought as follows: “*Your heaven and hell are within yourself: Look inside!*” (quoted in Nasr 1987, 397). Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) also proposed a similar view: “*To different minds, the same world is a hell, and a heaven*” (quoted in Gilman et al. 1961, 71).

## 7 Ordinary and Transpersonal Dimensions of Mind

According to the diverse spiritual traditions of the world, there is a transpersonal dimension in human beings that is both transcendent and immanent. It lies beyond the compass of conventional ratiocination and integrates all the multi-faceted dimensions of a person – with all the epistemological consequences that this entails. Rabbi Israel of Ruzhin (1796–1850) points out: “*Thought may be utilized for holy or unholy purposes. Should not a man’s intellect elevate his thoughts to the Supreme Mind?*” (quoted in *The Hasidic Anthology* 1963, 91). The perspective of two minds, one ordinary and the other transpersonal, is captured in *The Laws of Manu* (1:14): “*From himself he also drew forth the mind, which is both real and unreal.*” Śrī Rāmakrishna (1836–1886) declares:

*“Through His Consciousness one becomes conscious of everything”* (1977, 615). In Hindu thought, the *“mind is Brahman”* (Chāndogya Upanishad 7:3:1). A corresponding idea was noted by Fu-Ta-shih (497–569) who stressed that *“Mind is Buddha”* (quoted in Abe 1997, 71). St. Nikitas Stithatos (c. 1000–c. 1090) writes *“God is... Intellect”* (*The Philokalia*, Vol. 4 1998, 139), and, as Moses Maimonides (1138–1204) also observed, *“God is the intellectus”* (1956, 100). This metaphysical understanding can be summarized as follows: *“Brahman [note: is] mind: for from mind all beings have come, by mind they all live, and unto mind they all return”* (Taittirīya Upanishad 3:4:1). Ādi Śankara taught the supra-individual aspect of cognition: *“The universe is an unbroken series of perceptions [note: cognitions] of Brahman”* (1921, 226).

In the traditional or pre-modern world, there were modes of knowledge, with corresponding levels of reality, by which one could realize ultimate reality. Parmenides (515–445) acknowledges that to be is to know: *“The same thing is there for thinking and for being”* (2000, 57). Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772–1810) has this to say: *“The thought of man is his being: he who thinks of the upper world is in it”* (quoted in Buber 1962, 13). The unity of the knower and the known needs to be realized through direct awareness (Izutsu 1994, 7):

*[M]etaphysics or ontology is inseparably connected with the subjective state of man, so that the self-same reality is said to be perceived differently in accordance with the different degrees of consciousness... the highest degree of knowledge is always achieved when the knower, the human subject, becomes completely unified and identified with the object so much so that there remains no differentiation between the two.*

Through *metanoia* or radical transformation, which appears in all sapiential traditions, we can restore the Intellect or “eye of the heart” to safely navigate the overwhelming complexity of consciousness. This was St. Paul’s instruction: *“Be renewed in the spirit of your mind”* (Ephesians 4:23). However, we need to undergo a phase of purification prior to any abiding union with the Absolute; otherwise, our minds will remain akin to *“a venomous snake or scorpion”* (Shinran 2007, 47) according to the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist master Shinran (1173–1263). This is how we can begin to make sense of that famous line by the English poet William Blake (1757–1827): *“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite”* (1906, 26).

## 8 Mind as a Mirror of Reality

*“In a pure mind shines the light of the Self”* according to the Māndūkya Upanishad (3:1). Put differently, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328) points out that the goal is for *“the human mind [note: to] be united to God”* (1986, 76). Additionally, we read: *“When the mind is silent... it can enter into a world, which is far beyond the mind: the highest End”* (Maitrī Upanishad 6:24). The Taoist tradition states that: *“When body and mind are both quiet, Heaven and Earth merge”* (Cleary 1999, 520), and the Psalms declare: *“Be still, and know that I am God”* (46:10).

When the mind is not anchored in the transcendent, it cannot properly discern the nature of its fluctuating thoughts or unstable states. Jung once asked: *“By what criterion do we judge something to be an illusion? Does there exist for the psyche anything which we may call ‘illusion’? the psyche does not trouble itself about... categories of reality... It is highly probable that what we call illusion is actual for the psyche”* (1933, 72–73). For this reason, *“distraction is the cause of the intellect’s obscuration”* (*The Philokalia*, Vol. 3 1995, 182) and *“if you do not put an end to delusions prompted by external things, you will not overcome those that ambush you from within”* (*The Philokalia*, Vol. 4 1998, 179). Accordingly, we need to remember that no matter how sullied our consciousness may appear to be, there is always an indwelling connection to the Spirit that can never be erased. Every human being, no matter what their circumstances, is born with an innately pure mind. The following passage from, the Buddhist philosopher Aśvaghosa (c. 80–c. 150) is instructive (1967, 50):

*Mind, though pure in its self nature from the beginning, is accompanied by ignorance. Being defiled by ignorance, a defiled [state of] Mind comes into being. But, though defiled, the Mind itself is eternal and immutable. Only the Enlightened Ones are able to understand what this means.*

*What is called the essential nature of Mind is always beyond thoughts. It is, therefore, defined as ‘immutable.’ When the one World of Reality is yet to be realized, the Mind [is mutable and] is not in perfect unity [with Suchness]. Suddenly, [a deluded] thought arises; [this state] is called ignorance.*

An integrated mind sees both the mirror and the images that are reflected in it, as Zhūangzi (Chuang Tzu, c. 369–c. 286) notes: *“[T]he perfect man employs his mind as a mirror”* (1889, 97). Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) writes, *“when the mind is perfectly calm – or perfectly simple – Truth is mirrored in it just as objects are reflected in calm water”* (2007, 162). Eighth-cen-

ture Indian tantric master Padmasambhāva illustrates how our original state of the mind, which is unconditioned by the images of the phenomenal world, can envision an abiding unity behind all forms (Evans-Wentz 1954, 211):

*In its true state, mind is naked, immaculate; not made of anything, being of the Voidness; clear, vacuous, without duality, transparent; timeless, uncompounded, unimpeded, colourless; not realizable as a separate thing, but as the unity of all things, yet not composed of them; of one taste, and transcendent over differentiation.*

Huang Po (d. 850) addresses the transpersonal dimension of our original mind in this way (1958, 29–30):

*All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, beside which nothing exists. This Mind, which is without beginning, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green nor yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the categories of things which exist or do not exist, nor can it be thought of in terms of new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, for it transcends all limits, measures, names, traces and comparisons... Only awake to the One Mind...*

The ultimate purpose of human life is to return consciousness to our “primordial nature” (Ar. *fitriah*), the “image of God” (Lat. *imago Dei*), “Buddha-nature” (Sa. *Buddha-dhātu*), or “Self” (Sa. *Ātmā*) that surpasses the “name and form” (Sa. *nāma-rūpa*) of all appearances. The ordinary mind remains ensnared in the world of phenomenal appearances, and longs to return to its transpersonal source. There is but one consciousness that dwells at the heart of all beings – that is what we seek as the goal of our spiritual odyssey during our transient sojourn in this world.

## 9 Conclusion

It is in the nature of the ordinary mind to be unstable yet, when restored to its center in the Spirit, it can reach its natural composure. In returning our thoughts and emotions to the very source of consciousness itself, we are able – as St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622) shows – to navigate the flux of the ordinary mind: “Do not lose your inward peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset” (1871, 228). Through abiding in consciousness, we can find the kind of peace in which Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–c. 1416) was able to say: “All will be well, and all will be well, and every kind of thing will be well” (1978, 225). According to the “science of the soul,” as known across all spiritual traditions, it is the way

in which the mind perceives that either supports our inner peace or disturbs it, rather than events in themselves. According to William Shakespeare (1564–1616), “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (1877, 154).

As all perturbations of mind are ephemeral, we are concerned with what lies beyond (while fully embracing) this realm of transience. As Guénon writes, “the unconditioned state... is superior to all the conditioned states” (2001, 163). Union with Ultimate Reality or the Absolute is described in the Hindu and Islamic traditions as “being-consciousness-bliss” (Sa. *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*; Ar. *wujūd-wijdān-wajd*). As the Divine is immanent as well as transcendent, consciousness not only surpasses the psycho-physical realm but also includes the human psyche. The antidote to our endless distractions – to our dispersed attention resulting from the overwhelming stimulus of the outer world – is, according to a host of saints and sages to return to our sacred center where we can access a deeper, undefiled consciousness to help us bring an equanimity to the topsy-turvy nature of our inner life, while helping us to discern unity in multiplicity, and multiplicity in unity.

A few exponents of modern Western psychology have acknowledged – as William James did – that “our normal waking consciousness... is but one special type of consciousness” (1985, 388). While this admission is certainly welcome, it is by no means a new discovery. This truth has long been recognized by the holistic psychologies of spiritual traditions. All true forms of the “science of the soul” accept that there are distinct realms of mind – and corresponding modes of knowing – that do not fit the mold of quotidian thinking.

It is high time that we re-evaluate the pernicious assumptions on which the post-Enlightenment world has been constructed. By grounding the discipline of psychology in traditional metaphysics, we might begin to restore our consciousness of the Divine in all things, including ourselves. This paper has aimed to demonstrate the severe limitations of modern Western psychology in comprehending the enigma of consciousness. By stressing the need to turn to forms of therapy that are founded on an authentic epistemological pluralism, we will come closer to restoring a true sense of wholeness in our healing modalities. In particular, we may also be able, finally, to repair the tragically broken bond between the sacred and the fully integrated treatments that are now so sorely needed in the crucial area of mental health, which is undergoing such a profound crisis today.

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