

Editor's Introduction Transcending Self-Consciousness

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What is this thing we each call "I" and consider the eye of consciousness, that which beholds objects in the world and objects in our minds? This inner perceiver seems to be the same *I* who calls forth memories or images at will, the *I* who feels and determines whether to act on those feelings or suppress them, as well as the *I* who worries and makes plans and attempts to avoid those worries and act on those plans. Am I the subject, thus the source, of my awareness, just as you are the subject and source of your awareness? If this is the case, it is likely impossible to be conscious without the self (yours or mine), the eye of consciousness, and it must certainly not be desirable, for such a consciousness would have no focal point, no self-that-is-conscious to guide it, so it would be cast adrift on a wide and wild sea like a boat that has broken from its anchor. Without self-enclosure, "We shall go mad no doubt and die that way," as Robert Graves (1927/1966) expressed it.

Graves was, however, referring to the loss of language. I find it intriguing to observe how intimate is the association among language, culture, and self (and by this latter term, I refer explicitly to self-consciousness). It is as though they are scions from the same root. Here's the lines in Graves' "The Cool Web" that precede the above:

There's a cool web of language winds us in,
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
In brinness and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,
Throwing off language and its watery clasp
Before our death, instead of when death comes,
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,
We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Graves sees language as a cool web that filters us "from too much joy or too much fear". Without it, we would be open to uncultivated, animal awareness in the moment, similar to the unmediated awareness of children. Presumably the mediation of language has gives us a cool distance from the intensity of being; it allows us to gain much control over our environment as well binding our own untamed emotions. He indicates that by "throwing off language and its watery

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clasp", we would also "lose self-possession" and apparently go mad and die as a result. Of course, Graves is likely writing with the irony of the modernist poet, smiling grimly or perhaps sadly at our distance from raw experience.

I chose the excerpt from this poem since it so directly expresses our own distance from what some refer to as *raw experience* or, contrarily *pure consciousness*, or, more simply, as *being* or *the real* (though in each there are layers of complexity not dealt with here). Oh, we are still animals and all of us have been children, so we have experienced unfettered, reactive awareness within the context of our species. We, *ourselves*, remain nested within such open-ended awareness, yet we are different: we have developed a new context within the larger context of embodied being, a context that reduces natural awareness while increasing cultural consciousness (otherwise known as self-consciousness).

I am telling you this by writing these words on this page with my iMac keyboard, which you are reading because you have spent time learning to do so, and this is not even to mention the complex cultural knowledge that has gone into building the computer whose screen you're looking at or the creating the journal you hold in your hands. We interact through a mediated environment (so *the media* itself becomes our new environment) made of inventions and symbols. We do not see, smell, hear or touch each other so have become, for all intents and purposes, disembodied writing and reading programs. Our selfhood is entirely representational, our context for being radically divorced from nature but just as radically expanded into the lived reality of cultural symbol and artefact.

As Robert Jay Lifton stated, "Culture is inseparable from symbolization" (1993, p. 13), referring to the distinctive attribute of human culture. We are the *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer, 1944), the symbolic animal that has become aware of its own awareness. We have been drawn into intersubjective mutuality – identifying with others within our cultural spectrum and, from that position outside our natural embodiment, have observed, conceived and named our own being. We each call it "myself" or "I" or "me", and unquestioningly accept specific names most often given to us by our parents. Given time and consistent behavioural modification, we reify the *self-name* so that we mistake it for the reality it represents. We objectify our natural subjectivity, watching ourselves from the outside to make sure our actions or even our thoughts are appropriate. It may be said that we gain a self but lose the soul (in the sense of non-self-conscious awareness that participates in the world).

Let me clear, by *self* I mean our learned self-concept, what psychology once called *ego* – that which postmodernists recognize as a cultural construction and phenomenologists call self-consciousness. (I do not refer here to the self as the subjective perspective of a body or system but to the objective *concept* of that self.) Language and symbolization remain both the content and the boundary of self-consciousness. Language allows us to name our own embodied experience in an ongoing present and call it consciousness.

But here is the quandary — by naming itself, natural experience becomes an object to itself, that is, the subject becomes an object to itself to the extent that it identifies with other culturally constructed selves and names its own existence. One becomes self-conscious. All we directly know of consciousness is our own consciousness and, according to Zahavi (2005), philosophical phenomenology agrees that all human consciousness is self-consciousness, even when not recognized as such. One of the most important phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), could see that the self, which we individually identify as our subjectivity, is in fact an object among other objects in an objective world:

The cleavage between the “subjective” and the “objective” according to which physics defines its domain ... and correlatively psychology also establishes its domain, does not prevent [the subjective and objective] from being conceived according to the same fundamental structure; on the contrary it requires that: they are finally two orders of objects, to be known in their intrinsic properties by a pure thought which determines what they are in themselves. ... [A] moment comes when the very development of knowledge calls into question the absolute spectator always presupposed. (pp. 19–20)¹

So our living bodies identify themselves *as* selves in a world of other selves, a world otherwise known as symbolic culture. Body-world awareness becomes relegated to that which we call the *unconscious mind*, the source of conscious selfhood, while the self assumes the role of conscious agent and believes itself to be the entity that perceives and experiences *through* the body and strives to be the commander-in-chief of all thoughts and carnal actions (which it never is). Selves communicate to selves, just as we are doing here, but it becomes very difficult, if not impossible to speak of embodied or world awareness since it is *by definition beyond definition*, that is, beyond the words and symbols that make up the very boundaries of the self.

In former times, when coherent culturally embraced religions or spiritual codes were accepted unquestioningly, transcending the self to be nearer to God or the Gods or to travel in spirit worlds was an accepted reality. In this case, it was clear what was beyond the individual self – a spiritual reality, but one still verified by the culture. In these cosmopolitan, modern, and postmodern times, no one has a cross-cultural vision of self-transcendence that is accepted everywhere (since global cultures now seed each other and few seem even willing to discuss anything *spiritual*). It now seems impossible even to conceive of any sort of awareness beyond culturally-determined self-consciousness. We have crossed the bridge from relational animal-world awareness into symbolic interaction and there seems to be no way out, as modernist philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1944) noted:

Yet there is no remedy against this reversal of the natural order. Man cannot escape from his own achievement. He cannot but adopt the conditions of his

¹ My thanks to Steven M. Rosen (2008) for bringing this quotation to my attention.

own life. No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. (p. 25)

No way out? It seems we have indeed become prisoners of our own device. Perhaps it is true: we cannot escape the self we are or have become. Its very fabric is made of our memories (and narratives of those memories); memory tells us who one is, and one is the one who remembers. If we had an experience absolutely, totally beyond the self, there would be no observer, thus no one to remember the event, thus the experience would have happened to no one. Do such experiences take place?

Postmodern philosopher-psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan deals with the biological substrate with his conception of the “real”, referring, it seems, to raw, instinctive drives. Alan Sheridan, in a translator's note to Lacan's *Ecrits* (1977), explains this:

The “real” ... stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. What is prior to the assumption of the symbolic, the real in its “raw” state (in the case of the subject, for instance, the organism and its biological needs), may only be supposed, it is an algebraic x . (pp. ix-x)

Experience of the “real”, outside language, must therefore certainly happen but can lead to no new knowledge since it has no means of being recalled by the self. As soon as comprehension is attempted, the experience becomes symbolized, and the “raw” experience becomes transformed into an object of memory and assimilated into the past of the self. It is no longer self-transcendent experience.

But if the self is identified with self-consciousness, transcending it may not mean its obliteration, as it must when experience occurs without an observing self (e.g., in the case of the wild animal and younger children). Once selfhood has been attained, one need not keep self-consciousness at the centre of awareness (egocentricity). In fact, as I have previously suggested (Nixon, 2010), in times of personal crisis or under the spell of creative inspiration, our thoughts or actions or perceptions may spring from a source we, *ourselves*, had not known was there. Consciousness of self is temporarily ignored, so the body – the incarnate soul that is always in tune with the invisible natural forces – may itself act (in the way we call *spontaneous*). And, of course, there are the other times when such egocentricity is overthrown in acts of selflessness (as indicated in the article by Syamala Hari). In such cases, soul may awaken, with the self present on the sidelines, as it were, to bear witness, or as an organ through which one may communicate with other selves. Obliteration of self is loss of identity (as in death?), but transcendence of self-consciousness is possible.

Self-transcendence should not be confused with the self-transformation that takes place throughout one's life. One changes, often in unexpected ways, but the self still

feels it is at helm of action and is the guiding light of consciousness. The self may be transformed so it becomes more transparent or permeable, and, in that way, one edges towards self-transcendence. But absolute transcendence of the self would dissolve that self with original awareness continuing in an unfathomably intense present without a past or future. Awareness-in-itself could be said to be aware of nothing or of everything, for without differentiation there could be no difference.

But, *self-consciousness* transcended (as opposed to self-dissolution, so the remembering self remains itself remembered) could have metaphysical implications: Those who have cultivated the transcending of self-consciousness in life, experiencing it over and over again and gaining a measure of control over the awakening, may well be able to retain the artifacts of selfhood – memories – as original awareness leaves the body behind, that is, in death. Just as the electricity continues after the light bulb darkens, in either case, life energy withdraws from the body but continues as unbound dynamism, but, in the latter case of self as silent witness, the memories of a lifetime may go with it, perhaps to enrich the manifold of experience in that source, which, in this way undergoes change and learning. Without those memories, able to withstand such radical decentering, the self dies with the body.

None of this is to imply that the transcendence of self-consciousness is any way *spiritual*, that is, supernatural or out-of-this-world. Of those realms, many have written, but I have no knowledge of such things or of anyone who does. In fact, transcendence is less the discovery of new consciousness and more the reawakening to *old* consciousness. “The awakening is really the rediscovery or the excavation of a long lost treasure,” as the great Zen interpreter, D. T. Suzuki (1964, p. 179) so well expressed it. Further, transcending means transcending our isolated self-consciousness, not transcending the world or *nature* that made consciousness possible in the first place:

There is in every one of us, though varied in depth and strength, an eternal longing for “something” which transcends a world of inequalities. ... “To transcend” suggests “going beyond,” “being away from,” that is, a separation, a dualism. I have, however, no desire to hint that the “something” stands away from the world in which we find ourselves. (p. 196)

The transcending of self-consciousness, in this view, is to return to embodiment and its intimate intermingling with the natural world, and perhaps there is a further step — to finally transcend the conscious contexts of life and carnality into pure subjectivity yet retain the memorial artifacts of a self once lived.

None of the articles in this issue precisely agree with me on this. In fact, they are wonderful in the variety of understandings to do with the self and with consciousness – and with the transcendence or transformation of self or consciousness. I will

be the first to admit that I have been affected by each, and also that I have been humbled by what I have learned. My assumptions about selfhood, its construction, and its transcendence have been deconstructed and reconstructed, even as I edited, and I have had to modify – or open – my views.

How one transcends the self depends on the self that experiences it. Is it instigated or sought, does it happen by accident, or by an act of Grace? Is it common or rare? Is it brought on by the ingestion of psychedelic agents or by meditation or by being overcome by fear or merely by caring more about the welfare of others than oneself? Is it *transcendence* to experience a shift of perspective or dissolution of the self? In the pages that follow, each of these paths is explored in nine ways, each unique unto itself. None of them deal with absolute self-transcendence, which should be no surprise, for, as I've indicated, there would no longer a self or person to record or communicate the event. Many of them deal the transcendence of self-consciousness, my own included, but only two describe the ingestion of mind-altering psychedelics to catalyze the event. One sees self-construction from the ground-up, as it were, as a form of transcending a previous self that has disintegrated. One looks to acts of kindness to sidestep the illusion of self-consciousness. Two, at least, look to creative experience in the arts as a way to connect with universal spontaneity, but in very different ways. The others refer to what might be called spiritual experiences that, though thirsted for or sought, arrive unexpectedly, almost like a gift.

A brief preview of each follows, without giving away too much lest the reader feel s/he has already gotten the gist of the piece, thus depriving him- or herself of fine writing and an amazing narrative.

Christopher Holvenstot has contributed two articles. In the first one, "Modeling a World", he describes a recurring experience that must have been more wrenching to write about than it was to read (and it is wrenching to read). He periodically feels himself descend into such a state of non-identity that he nears catatonia. This self-dissolution is sort of self-transcendence in reverse. But he describes how he has learned to model selfhood by observing others and then becoming that self. In his second article, "Making Meaning", he tells of his involvement in an intense psychodrama workshop in which individual dreams are enacted by the group. Such interpersonal actualization leads him not only to new awareness but even to new ways of dreaming.

Milenko Budimir describes his engagement with meditation practice and how it began to change his life by allowing him experiences that can only be described as self-transcendent. It was good to hear from someone who has had such experiences as recently as the 1990s since it is truly amazing how many people had their peak experiences between the years of 1967 and 1972. And, despite this being called the psychedelic era of the youth revolution, many of those who had such awakenings in that time never ingested any psychedelics! It's as though it was a time when an

irruption of the sacred (as Mircea Eliade somewhere phrased it) broke into our world, as it has in other notable periods of history. Milenko has given me peace of mind by assuring me that such self-transcendence continues to occur, albeit rarely.

Chris Nunn is one those who had such transcendent awakenings in that late sixties-early seventies period that they must be called *mystical*, that is, they are imbued with an undeniable sense of “something far more deeply interfused” (to paraphrase Wordsworth) that is experienced as sacred and possibly even spiritual. For Chris, such experiences were occasionally repeated at other times, too, but with lesser intensity; however, by his description, this may be because they have now been assimilated into his personality and life-philosophy and are part of who he is.

Syalmala Hari takes a unique view and runs two parallel tracks in intriguing prose. In one track, she investigates consciousness – or is it self-consciousness? – by suggesting it is a product of the memory functions of the brain, thus unreal. She seems to agree with Merleau-Ponty that the consciousness we name may be more an object than private subjectivity. We are instead part of absolute subjectivity, even if we are too self-centered to know this. In her second track, she investigates her own experience noting how unselfish acts of compassion or kindness lead to self-forgetting or even selflessness, and in that way are self-transcendent.

Roland Cichowski compellingly describes his tendency to have mystical awakenings even as a young child. These awakened in him a thirst to understand why the doors of perception were opened and he began a lifelong quest. At first he sought answers from others, especially as found in books, but, though these may have coloured his expectations, in the end the profound mystical experience that shook him to his soul was entirely unexpected and as terrifying as it was ecstatic. Roland’s learning had prepared him to deal with the lifelong consequences of his natural awakening, whereas, in my own case, I had no concepts I could apply in the aftermath.

Phil Wolfson writes of a life of natural transformations that still continue today. But he also writes unabashedly of a plethora of journeys into other realities brought on by planned experimentation with a veritable pharmacopeia of psychedelic (mind-altering) or entheogenic (inducing spiritual awakenings). He even draws up a taxonomy of such experiences, both positive and negative. He is such a veteran of altered states and even spirit travelling that he might be considered a modern-day shaman. Clearly, he is not a whacked-out tripster but one of our wise men.

The most visually stunning piece is New York painter Tobi Zausner’s “Transcending the Self Through Art”, which includes 8 plates, one of which is on the cover of this issue and another on her title page. In her elegant prose, she recognizes that the source of creative inspiration is always *self-transcendent*, beyond the boundaries of ego. In fact, one must suppress the ego and its chattering to open oneself to the silence from which creative intuition arrives. The receptive body must respond to

hints from elsewhere or elsewhen (perhaps the world itself) to give form to the whisperings of the Muses. We are honoured to include this fine work.

In the last piece, I gave form with painful honesty to my own life altering awakening at 19 as the result of a very powerful LSD trip. My story is like Joseph Campbell's journey of hero (1949/1968) in that there is a *call*, a *series of trials*, a *victory*, and a *return*, sometimes followed by a *resurrection*. In my case, however, I was unable to cope with what had happened and my *return* was to a self now in such a state of disintegration that I was in danger of losing my way forever. My *resurrection*, as such, is still in process. This was not easy to write.

All in all, it should be recognized that no theory or philosophy is built entirely from abstract concepts or logical reasoning or experimental evidence. All of us are the speaking animals of the planet we call Earth, and we each have had experiences (remembered or not) that have guided our thinking and given us our destiny.

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