Preface/Introduction

The question under discussion is metaphysical and truly elemental. It emerges in two aspects – *how did we come to be conscious of our own existence*, and, as a deeper corollary, *do existence and awareness necessitate each other*? I am bold enough to explore these questions and I invite you to come along; I make no claim to have discovered absolute answers. However, I do believe I have created here a compelling interpretation. You'll have to judge for yourself.

What follows is the presentation of three essays I have worked on over the past several years seeing publication for the first time. "Hollows of Experience" was written first as an invited chapter for a collection on the ontology of consciousness. However, when cuts became necessary, my chapter got the knife. Its length has prohibited it from publication in any print journal. "Myth and Mind" was written next as a journal article, but as my involvement with it grew so did its length, so it has also idled on my *websty* awaiting its call. "From Panexperientialism to Conscious Experience" was written most recently, but it is the only one to have been available to the public elsewhere than my own website. Under the name, "The Continuum of Experience", it was Target Article #95 on the recently closed Karl Jaspers Forum (for discussion purposes only).

I have put them in a different sequence here, for reasons of logical sense. Up first, "Panexperientialism" deals with an idea difficult for many to accept, namely that conscious experience is a particular mode of symbolically reflected experience that is largely unique to our species. However, I aver that experienced sensation in itself (as found, for example, in autonomic sensory response systems) goes "all the way down" into nature, and thus the title, panexperientialism.

Understanding this idea is helpful to dealing with the focus on language in Part I of "Hollows", next, since here speech and general symbolic interaction in general are found to be the catalysts for the creation of our consciously experienced world (our "lived reality"). In Part II, however, I explore how experienced sensations must be coeval with existence, and, with even greater temerity, how all this sensational existence might have arisen within some literally inconceivable background of awareness-in-itself that yet has a dynamism that occasionally breaks into existence as experiential events and entities. (The latter may sound wacky, but physicists and cosmologists are themselves attempting to come to terms with that which seethes with vast potential energy in what they refer to as the quantum vacuum.)

"Myth and Mind" was put third since it deals with a major lacuna in "Hollows" – that presumed prehistoric period when members of our species made the painful crossing of the symbolic threshold into the beginnings of cultural consciousness. Speech plays a central role here, too, but I look more at narrative structures from the dawn of self-awareness when ritual and myth became vital to human survival. Why would fantastic stories and bizarre rituals be necessary? I speculate that growing foresight led to the unavoidable realization of certain mortality, from which, in turn, emerged the secondary realization that we were now *alive*. In con-

trast to our yet-to-come death, we have life here and now, and by ritually identifying with a symbolically expanded mythic, i.e., sacred, reality, we may continue to live on after bodily death, just as our ancestors and loved ones must also do. Language and mythmaking are necessary to avoid mortal despair and they remain at the core of human consciousness.

As Ernst Cassirer (1944) has noted, language and myth are "twin creatures", both metaphoric webs over a reality we can never wholly comprehend. We live in the symbolic and construct our works of imagination and wars of conquest to make life meaningful, to feel immortal, and to sense that we ourselves participate in a reality greater than ourselves. No doubt we do, but this does not mean our culturally constructed self-identities survive the death of our bodies, and it does not imply that our symbolic concepts can ever indicate the ultimate truth. We simply *must* symbolize an extended reality that was sacred to our ancestors: "Is it not our way, as illusory as it may be, to force continuance on our world and our life in the face of their inevitable ending? Are we not compelled to extend those imaginary horizons as far as we can despite the terror and the sometime joy their extension incites? Is their closure not a form of death?" (Crapanzano, p. 210)

Of course, this leaves me in the uncomfortable position of being forced to admit that this venture of mine must inevitably be another attempt at meaningful mythmaking. But what else could it be? This is certainly not a scientific proof though it is indeed an academically rigorous exploration. (Just try to count the citations!) I hope the reader will judge my thesis on the basis of its coherence, the sense of meaning it evokes, my intellectual responsibility, and, finally, the engagement it inspires. If you have read my expositions and found yourself immersed in the timeless questions I here call forth, I would call these writings successful (even if you violently disagree with my answers).

I am very grateful to Huping Hu for granting me this special issue of JCER in which to present my ideas in some detail. He has patiently dealt with my exuberant approach and allowed the many changes I kept coming up with right until the final publication date. I also wish to thank the many potential commentators who politely replied to my invitation, and, even more, I thank those who made time to write actual commentaries

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Contents

Preface/Introduction 213

From Panexperientialism to Conscious Experience:

The Continuum of Experience 216

Hollows of Experience 234

Myth and Mind:

The Origin of Human Consciousness in the Discovery of the Sacred 289