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COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS: A PAPER READ
BEFORE THE AMERICAN MEDICO-PSY-
CHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION IN PHILA-
DELPHIA, 18 MAY, 1894, BY DR. R. M.
BUCKE

R. L.

"Light rare, untellable, lighting the very light."

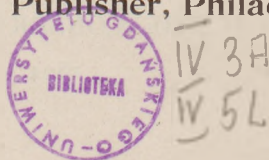
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COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

All original work done by me within the last twenty years has dealt, directly or indirectly (but generally directly) with one subject—namely—with mental evolution. In papers read in '77 and '78, and more exhaustively in a volume published in '79, I considered the evolution of the moral nature. In '81 I read a paper on the evolution of the intellect and some of the sense functions, and in '92 I dealt still further with these latter. I venture to draw your attention to these labors of mine because they have a direct bearing upon what I am to say to-day. Twenty years' study has shown me clearly that the human mind has been slowly evolved by a species of unfolding or growth, extending over millions of years. Not that the *human* mind has existed as long as that, but that the mind which we possess to-day, in its human and its ante-human forms, extends back for unknown ages and eons into the geologic past of the planet, sending its roots and drawing its sap to-day from the lives of tens of thousands of generations of our prehuman as well as human ancestors. And, it may be said in passing, it is apparently this almost infinite experience, treasured up and handed down the ages in the form of instincts, monitions of conscience and delicate phases of emotion, that gives to the human mind of the present time many of its most profound and subtle qualities.

Be this as it may, the thought and reading of twenty years have convinced me that the human mind, as we know it to-day, is a lineal descendent of a certain prehuman mind which could not have been very different from the mind of the higher animals of the present time, and that this animal mind grew into the human mind by means of two closely related but distinct processes—first, by the unfolding and expansion of its various faculties, and, second, by the springing up within it from time to time of entirely new functions, which, in their turn, unfolded and expanded as the generations and the centuries succeeded one another. My volume on “Man’s Moral Nature” was intended to make clear whence proceeded and how from lower to higher planes advanced this important part of the human mind, and a paper read by me in ’81 was intended as an exposition of the manner of growth of the intellect. That, and another two years ago, set forth reasons to believe in the addition from time to time of new faculties to the immense aggregate.

The process is, in short, as I have before pointed out, precisely similar to that of evolution in all other departments. A tree, for instance, both sends out new branches and all its branches, both new and old, increase in size; a language (like the original Aryan or the Latin) puts out as its branches dialects which grow into languages and put forth others in their turn; a species, either animal or plant, puts forth as its branches varieties which grow into species and in their turn put forth other varieties which later also become species.

Suppose, then, we admit, as I think we must, that far back in geologic time what we call mind had its origin in some very low organization in the form of mere excita-

bility ; that later on, from this initial excitability, was born sensation ; from that again, after many ages and generations and much experience, simple consciousness ; and again, from that, "when the time was ripe," self consciousness. Supposing we admit this to be a rough description of the trunk of our mental tree, then we have as its branches all the senses, each with its diverse and wide-spreading congeries of functions, we have also, as another vast trunk, the moral nature, and, as another still, volition, without stopping to mention many another limb and twig of less consequence.

The center of all is, of course, the trunk, and upon this I want to keep your minds fixed for the moment. That trunk, resting upon and rooted in inorganic nature, may be divided from the ground up, as before said, into vitality, excitability, sensation, simple consciousness, self consciousness—these being supposed to be superimposed, the one upon the other, in the order in which they are named. The line between simple consciousness and self consciousness is, of course, the line between the brute and the man, since self consciousness is the basis of language, of human faculty in general, and of the methods and arts that constitute objective human life.

As vitality, excitability, sensation, simple consciousness and self consciousness each one arose, in its turn, from anterior conditions which prepared the way for it and made it possible, so every other faculty and function existing to-day had its own date of birth. For instance : The general sense of sight dates back many millions of years into geological times—the color sense only dates back about a thousand generations. The sense of hearing is very old—the musical sense is just coming into being.

The animal instincts which are the basis of it go back far behind the carboniferous era, but anything we would to-day call a human moral nature is probably less than a hundred thousand years old. How do we know how long any given faculty has existed in any given race? Chiefly by three indications :

1st, the average age at which the faculty appears in the individual ;

2d, the more or less universality of the faculty in the members of the race as we see it at present ;

3d, the readiness (or the reverse) with which the faculty is lost (as in sickness).

For the sake of illustrating the position taken let us briefly compare almost any two faculties. Let us take for this purpose simple and self consciousness.

1. Simple consciousness appears within a few hours or days of birth. Self consciousness appears at about the age of three years.

2. Simple consciousness is absolutely universal in the human race. Self consciousness is congenitally absent in all true idiots—*i. e.*, in about one or two in every thousand individuals of the race.

3. Simple consciousness is only lost in the most profound disturbances, as in epilepsy and coma, and only for short periods—a few minutes, hours or days. Self consciousness is always lost when simple consciousness is lost, and over and above it is frequently lost as in the delirium of fever and in insanity (simple consciousness remaining present), and it often remains absent for days, weeks, even months.

These three facts clearly show that simple consciousness is a much older faculty than is self consciousness.

But why is it that the older a faculty is in a race the earlier it shall be acquired by the members of the race? The answer is not far to seek, and has a most important bearing upon the subject immediately under discussion—*i. e.*, the existence or not in the race of the new faculty which I have named Cosmic Consciousness; it is, briefly, as follows: Suppose that a race is coming into possession of a new faculty—say, self consciousness, the human moral nature, or color sense—it must be that the new faculty or sense will be first acquired by the foremost members of the race and at that time of life when these are at their best. The new faculty having been acquired by the foremost member of the race (foremost at least in that direction), is later acquired by any other member of the race who has in that particular line attained the position occupied by the member who first acquired it. As the race moves forward a larger and larger number of its members acquire the new faculty, until it becomes, let us say, fairly universal. Then another process sets in: the race gains, as it were, upon the new faculty, or upon the level upon which the new faculty rests; and whereas no member at first acquired it under full maturity, say thirty years of age, later, certain members acquire it at twenty-five, then at twenty years, and, after thousands of generations, at three years of age, as in the case of self consciousness.

In the light of this short *résumé* of a large subject I will now briefly set forth what I have to say on the real subject of this paper. And, in the first place, does it not seem pretty certain that a race which has been enabled by its own inherent growth to advance from excitability to sensation, from that to simple consciousness,

from that to self consciousness ; that has been able to take on the human moral nature, color sense and a hundred other faculties—does it not seem pretty certain, I say, that this race, still as full of vitality as ever, will take on, as time passes, still other faculties? Have we any reason to think that a process which has been in full operation certainly for many millions of years, and probably from all eternity, will now cease? No rational being with the facts in his mind can suppose anything of the kind. To start with, then, we have the probability, if not certainty, that the human mind will advance beyond its present status, and that the next step made will be comparable to those made in the past, as from sensation to simple consciousness, or from that to self consciousness. Further, if the next step made in direct ascent is in the nature of a new consciousness it is reasonable to suppose that it will come *per saltum*, as does self consciousness, and not by infinite, almost imperceptible, degrees, as came, or is coming, for instance, the color sense.

I have next to say that the human mind is now in the very act of making this supposed step—is now in the very act of stepping from the plane of self consciousness to a higher plane, which I call Cosmic Consciousness.

I have in the last three years collected twenty-three cases of this so-called Cosmic Consciousness, and what little further I have time to say at present will be based on the actual facts belonging to them. But you will kindly remember that anything I may say in the brief time at present at my disposal will bear an exceedingly small proportion to the mass of facts collected by me on this subject.

First, as to the age at which, if at all, Cosmic Consciousness is attained. In twenty-one of the twenty-three cases I have been able to fix this with considerable certainty and accuracy, and I find that illumination took place: In two cases at the age of thirty, in one case at the age of thirty-one, in three cases at the age of thirty-two, in three cases at the age of thirty-three, in two cases at the age of thirty-four, in five cases at the age of thirty-five, in one case at the age of thirty-seven, in two cases at the age of thirty-eight, in one case at the age of thirty-nine, and in one case at the age of forty.

Thus, then, the new consciousness obeys the first supposed necessary condition and appears when the organism is at its highest point of efficiency and excellence.

You will please keep steadily in mind that I claim that what I call Cosmic Consciousness is not simply an expansion or extension of the self-conscious mind with which we are all familiar, but the superaddition of a function as distinct from any possessed by the average man as self-consciousness is distinct from any function possessed by one of the higher animals. It is my purpose now to attempt to give you some idea of what this new function is, and to show you (or at least to give you some hints) how the Cosmic Conscious, differs from the merely self-conscious, mind. But I warn you that with the best intentions in the world I shall not be able to make this at all clear to you, and that if you desire enlightenment on this point you will have to seek it in the books that contain the explanations of these men themselves—in, for instance, the Upanishads and Sutras, which give us the experience of one of the earliest cases, that, namely, of Gautama the Buddha; in the Epistles

of Paul; in the "Shakspeare" sonnets; in Dante's "Divine Comedy" (especially in the "Paradise"); in the works of Honoré de Balzac (especially in "Louis Lambert" and "Seraphita"); in Behmey's "Aurora" and "Three Principles;" in the works of William Blake and those of Edward Carpenter; and, lastly, in the "Leaves of Grass" and other works of Walt Whitman. But the great difficulty has always been and is still that the Cosmic Conscious and self-conscious minds are so far apart that words coming from the former are often strange and meaningless to the latter. They contain, as Paul expresses it, "a wisdom not of this world"—a wisdom, consequently, which is very apt not to be understood, and for that reason to be accounted no wisdom at all, but foolishness. I ought to say further, in the way of introduction, that though Cosmic Consciousness has certain fixed elements which give to it a clear individuality, yet that the range and variety of mind upon the plane of Cosmic Consciousness appears to be still greater than the range and variety of mind on the plane of self-consciousness—just as the range and variety of mind on the self-conscious plane is far greater than are these in any given species on the plane of simple consciousness. So that, in all ways, the men possessed of the new faculty are liable to differ and do differ enormously and in all directions one from the other; some of them being, for instance, supreme poets, others religious founders, prophets and apostles, others great artists, and so on. Also, I ought to say that, while some of them are so obviously great that they are counted superhuman, others are not to outward seeming strikingly different from their merely self-conscious contemporaries. Even

a casual study, however, of the characters and lives of these great men will reveal the plain fact that both by the intellect and by the moral nature they are enormously in advance of their self-conscious contemporaries.

What, now, are these fixed elements belonging to Cosmic Consciousness, to which I have referred?

First, there are certain phenomena connected with the onset, or oncoming, of the new faculty—which is usually, perhaps always, sudden, instantaneous. Among these the most striking is the sudden sense of being immersed in flame or in a brilliant light; this occurs entirely without warning or outward cause, and may happen at noonday or in the middle of the night. In order to give some notion of this dazzling subjective light I will show you what a few of these men have said about it.

Paul (in his speech to Agrippa) said: "As I journeyed to Damascus I saw on the way a light from heaven above the brightness of the sun." Then he heard the voice and then was caught up into the third heaven and heard unspeakable words. But the initial fact was the subjective light.

In the night called by the Arabs *Al Kader*—in the month of Ramadan—in the fortieth year of his age—in the cavern of Mount Hara—Mohammed heard a voice calling upon him; immediately thereafter, or at the same instant, a flood of light broke upon him of such intolerable splendor that he swooned away. On regaining his senses he beheld an angel in a human form, which, approaching from a distance, displayed a silken cloth covered with written characters. The angel said to him: "Read." Mohammed said he did not know how to read, but immediately afterwards his understanding was

illuminated and he read what was written on the cloth.

In the first canto of the "Paradise" Dante gives an account of the oncoming of the Cosmic sense in his case. And as descriptive of the commencement of the series of his experiences he has these words: "On a sudden day seemed to be added to day as if He who is able had adorned the heaven with another sun."

The report made by Whitman of the same occurrence is in very similar language. He says:

"As in a swoon one instant,
Another sun, ineffable, full dazzles me,
And all the orbs I knew—and brighter, unknown orbs;
One instant of the future land, Heaven's land."

The dazzling, sudden, unexpected, subjective light, then, is usually the first thing known of the change that is taking place. It is usually succeeded by alarm. For a longer or shorter time the person fears that he is becoming insane. Very often a voice is heard and the form of the person speaking may be seen. These phenomena (the light, the voice, the person seen) soon all pass away and the essential elements of the new order dawn upon the mind. These essential elements are a consciousness of the Cosmos, or, in other words, a consciousness of the life and order of the universe; not, you will please understand, a knowledge of this, but a consciousness of it—just as self consciousness, when it comes, gives the person not simply a hearsay or learned knowledge of himself as a separate and distinct individual, but something far deeper—*i. e.*, a consciousness of himself as a distinct personality.

With the intellectual illumination comes an indescribable moral elevation—an intense and exalted joyfulness,

and, along with this, a sense of immortality ; not merely a belief in a future life—that would be a small matter—but a consciousness that the life now being lived is eternal—death being seen as a trivial incident which does not affect its continuity. Further, there are annihilation of the sense of sin and an intellectual competency not simply surpassing the old, but on a new and higher plane.

Let us hear, now, in conclusion, very briefly, for my time is short, some of the words of a few of the men having Cosmic Consciousness, descriptive of this new state after they had fully entered upon it.

Gautama Buddha attained illumination at the age of about thirty-five years, under the Bo tree since and hence so celebrated. In the Dhama-Kakka-Pavattana-sutta he is reported to have said that “the noble truths” taught therein were not among the “doctrines handed down, but that there arose within him the eye to perceive them, the knowledge of their nature, the understanding of their cause, the wisdom that lights the true path, the light that expels darkness.” This is an excellent description of the intellectual illumination that belongs to Cosmic Consciousness. In the Maha Vagga it is said that during the first watch of the night following on Gautama’s victory over the evil one—that is, the night following upon his attainment of Cosmic Consciousness and his consequent victory over his old and lower condition—“he fixed his eyes upon the chain of causation, during the second watch he fixed his eyes upon the chain of causation, and during the third watch he fixed his eyes upon the chain of causation.” That is to say, the Cosmic order became visible to him, and he

could not for a long time remove his mind from this the grandest and most entrancing of all sights. Again, in the Akankheyya-sutta, are set forth, as taught by Buddha, the distinctive marks of Arahatsip—that is, of Cosmic Consciousness. The attainment of this condition, he says, will cause a man to become “beloved, popular, respected among his fellows, victorious over discontent and lust, over spiritual danger and dismay ; will bestow upon him the ecstasy of contemplation ; will enable him to reach with his body and remain in those stages of deliverance which are incorporeal and pass beyond phenomena ; cause him to become an inheritor of the highest heavens ; make him, being one, to become multiple—being multiple, to become one ; endow him with clear and heavenly ear surpassing that of men ; enable him to comprehend by his own heart the hearts of other beings and of other men ; to understand all minds ; to see with pure and heavenly vision surpassing that of men.”

In Buddhism Nirvana, which literally means “a blowing out,” as of a candle, is the word which stands for Cosmic Consciousness—the “blowing out,” or “extinction,” being not that of the soul, as sometimes supposed, but of the desires and instincts which belong to the self-conscious mind and which are thought to stand in the way of the attainment of the Cosmic sense.

The great Apostle Paul was (using the word in its medical sense) an admirable “case” of Cosmic Consciousness. His initial earnestness of character, his instantaneous illumination, his age at the time—probably a little over thirty—the subjective light, the voice which spoke to him, his consternation, the resulting intellectual

illumination and moral exaltation—all these typical symptoms make the true nature of his “conversion” as plain as would be a case of typhoid fever with frontal headache, diarrhœa, ochre stools, characteristic temperature and rose spots. But still more absolute proof of Paul’s entry into Cosmic Consciousness is his own account of his subsequent habitual feelings and convictions as given us by himself in those letters which have come down to us. He says, for instance, in Second Corinthians : “ I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I know not); such a one caught up even to the third heaven—into Paradise—and heard unspeakable words.” Again, Galatians : “ For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Here Paul uses almost exactly the same words as above quoted from Gautama. There is only time to give one more short quotation from Paul, but all his writings may be read with very great advantage from the present point of view. He says, in Romans : “ There is therefore no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and death. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh ; but they that are after the spirit the things of the spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death, but the mind of the spirit is life and peace.” That is to say : In Cosmic Consciousness there is no sense of sin and death. The merely self-conscious man

cannot by "keeping the law," or in any other way, destroy either sin or the sense of sin, but "Christ," that is, the Cosmic sense, can and does accomplish both.

In the case of Mohammed there was the same initial earnestness of character, the same instantaneous illumination. His age was thirty-nine. There were the intense subjective light, the voice which spoke to him; the same extreme consternation, the same intellectual illumination, the same moral exaltation.

In the case of Dante there was the same initial earnestness of character combined with unusual spirituality, the same instantaneous illumination. He was of the typical age at the time, namely, thirty-five years. There was the intense subjective light. The voice—that is, the duplex personality that belongs to the new condition—spoke to him. There was the same consternation, followed immediately by the same intellectual illumination and the same moral exaltation.

The evidence of Dante's illumination in his great work, "The Divine Comedy," is overwhelming, but I have only space here for one short quotation, namely, the passage in which he describes the oncoming of the Cosmic sense. He says: "Beatrice was standing with her eyes wholly fixed on the eternal wheels, and on her I fixed my eyes from thereabove removed. Looking at her, I inwardly became such as Glaucus became on tasting of the herb which made him consort in the sea of the other gods. Transhumanization cannot be signified in words; therefore, let the example suffice for him to whom grace reserves experience. If I was only what of me thou didst last create, O Love that governest the heavens, Thou knowest who with Thy light didst lift me."

Beatrice (*i. e.*, "making blessed") is Dante's name for Cosmic Consciousness. He says that when his illumination took place he fixed his eyes on the Cosmic sense, and the eyes of the Cosmic sense were wholly fixed on the eternal wheels (in the language of Gautama, "on the chain of causation"—both expressions meaning the same thing—*i. e.*, the life and order of the universe). Then he says: Looking upon this new sense that had come to me, I became transhumanized into a god. He says that of course this change that had been wrought in him cannot be expressed in words, and that no one will be able to understand it until he himself experiences it, and, like Paul, he does not know whether at that time he was in heaven or upon the earth, whether he continued during the experience in the body or whether for a time he left the body.

All these men recognize clearly three states or stages of mind—namely, simple consciousness, self consciousness, Cosmic Consciousness—and that there exists as clear and broad a distinction between the last two as between the first two.

Thus, Balzac says: "The world of ideas divides itself into three spheres—that of instinct (simple consciousness); that of abstraction (self consciousness); and that of specialism (Cosmic Consciousness)." "As an instinctive, man is below the level; as an abstractive, he attains to it; as a specialist, he rises above it. Specialism opens to man his course; the infinite dawns upon him; he catches glimpses of his destiny."

Balzac proceeds as follows: "There exist three worlds—the natural world, the spiritual world, the divine world. Humanity moves hither and thither in

the natural world, which is fixed neither in its essence nor in its properties. The spiritual world is fixed in its essence and variable in its properties. The divine world is fixed in its properties and in its essence." In other words, men who live almost entirely in simple consciousness float on the stream of time as do the animals—drift with the seasons, the food supply, etc., as a leaf drifts on a current, not self-moved or self-balanced, but moved by outer influences and balanced by the natural forces, as are the animals and trees. The fully self-conscious man takes stock of himself and is, so to say, self-centered. He feels that he is a fixed point; he judges all things with reference to this point. But outside of himself, we know, there is nothing fixed for him; he trusts what he calls God, and he does not trust. He is a Deist, an Atheist, a Christian, a Buddhist. He believes in science, but his science is constantly changing and will rarely tell him in any case anything worth knowing. He is fixed, then, on one point and moves freely on that. The man with Cosmic Consciousness, being conscious of himself and conscious of the Cosmos, its meaning and drift, is fixed both without and within—in Balzac's words, "in his essence and in his properties."

To sum up: The creature with simple consciousness only is a straw floating on a tide, moving freely every way with every influence. The self-conscious man is a needle pivoted by its center—fixed in one point but oscillating and revolving freely on that with every influence. The man with Cosmic Consciousness is the same needle magnetized. It is still fixed by its center, but besides that it points steadily to the north. It has found

something real and permanent outside of itself toward which it cannot but steadily look.

One word in conclusion : I have been searching three years for cases of Cosmic Consciousness and have so far found twenty-three. Several of these are contemporary, minor cases, such as may have occurred in any age and no record of them remain. I have, however, found thirteen, all of them so great that they must live. Of these thirteen cases five appeared in the thirteen hundred years extending from Gautama to Mohammed, and include, of course, both of these men. But including Dante, and from him to the present time (a space of barely six hundred years), there have lived no less than eight cases, and these, as far as I can see, just as great as the five cases of the earlier thirteen hundred years. But eight cases in six hundred years is more than three and a half times as great a frequency as five cases in thirteen hundred years. I do not pretend to say that cases of Cosmic Consciousness are becoming more frequent in exactly this ratio. There must have occurred a large number of cases in the last twenty-five hundred years that I know nothing about, and I suppose no man could say positively how many lived in any given epoch. But it seems to me certain that these men are more numerous in the modern than they were in the ancient world, and this fact, taken in connection with the general theory of psychic evolution propounded by the best writers on the subject, such as Darwin and Romanes, points to the conclusion that just as, long ago, self consciousness appeared in the best specimens of our ancestral race in the prime of life, and gradually became more and more universal, and appeared earlier and earlier,

until, as we see now, it has become almost universal and appears at the average age of about three years—so will Cosmic Consciousness become more and more universal, and appear earlier in the individual life, until practically the whole race will possess this faculty. I say the whole race, but as a matter of fact a Cosmic Conscious race will not be the race which exists to-day, any more than the present is the same race which existed prior to the evolution of self consciousness. The simple truth is, that a new race is being born from us, and this new race will in the near future possess the earth.



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