Part 3 Consciousness: The Question of Consciousness, What Is It and How Did It Emerge—and The Human Condition

The following synopsis outlines the subject matter of Part 3 of the proposed documentary. It is intended that the views of scientists studying consciousness, such as William H. Calvin, Nicholas Humphrey, Daniel Dennett, Roger Penrose, John R. Searle and Thomas Nagel will be sought for this part of the documentary. It is also envisaged that interviews will be conducted with psychologists and philosophers on the limitations imposed by our human condition, in particular our state of alienation.

SYNOPSIS

(Note to reader: All underlinings have been added for emphasis.)

A phenomenon that should become abundantly clear by the end of this documentary is that wherever there is polarised debate, it is a sure sign that the issue of the human condition is involved. The subject of 'consciousness' is one such example, for it has caused as much polarised debate as the question of purpose or meaning, and the issue of nurturing —the respective subjects of Parts 1 and 2 of this proposed documentary. In examining the question of God, purpose and integrative meaning, Part 1 of this series sought to demonstrate that the real issue lies in the extremely confronting nature of the subject. It was established that integrative meaning leaves humans feeling condemned as ungodly, guilty, even evil beings for being divisively behaved. To cope with this feeling of condemnation humans have lived in denial of integrative meaning, evasively claiming there is no purpose or meaning to existence.

In the case of the importance of nurturing in both the maturation of the human race and in our own lives, the explanation put forward in Part 2 argues that no child today is able to receive the amount of nurturing all infants received prior to the emergence of the embattled, upset state of the human condition. This inability to nurture our infants as much as we would like has meant the concept of nurturing is now an extremely confronting subject, which in turn has made it impossible to universally recognise its immense importance.

The concept of consciousness has met with similar resistance. While there are many definitions of the word 'consciousness', an appropriate one would be 'the ability to make sense of experience'. Using such a definition immediately highlights the problem with the issue of consciousness, for due to the depressing implications humans haven't wanted to 'make sense of experience', in particular recognise the truth of integrative meaning. To ask people to look into the issue of consciousness was to expect them to confront the issue of their own less than ideal, human condition-afflicted state. The issue of consciousness is tantamount to the issue of self, the subjective dimension to life, the issue of the human condition which humans have found so difficult to accept and confront. Indeed 'consciousness' has become a relatively safe, 'keep-at-arms-length' code word for the issue of the human condition.

In his acclaimed 1993 book *Complexity*, Roger Lewin refers to the philosopher Colin McGinn's observation about the study of consciousness: **'an understanding of consciousness is beyond the reach of the human mind…complex cognitive openness is not guaranteed for human**

beings and it should not be expected…an understanding of [consciousness] **is simply closed to us … because consciousness fundamentally is a subjective experience'** (p.167). Since mechanistic science is not holistic, it can't deal with the subjective experience, namely the experience of the human condition. As Templeton Prize-winning biologist Charles Birch once said, **'Science can't deal with subjectivity…what we were all taught in universities is pretty much a dead-end'** (public address, Sydney 1993).

In the following quote, renowned Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing acknowledges both the importance of the issue of consciousness (the human condition), and how truly difficult a **'realm'** it is to study: **'Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any aspect of present inter-human life** [p.12 of 156] **…We respect the voyager, the explorer, the climber, the space man. <u>It makes far more sense to me as a valid project—indeed, as a desperately urgently required project for our time—to explore the inner space and time of consciousness</u>. Perhaps this is one of the few things that still make sense in our historical context. We are so out of touch with this realm** [so in denial of the issue of the human condition] **that many people can now argue seriously that it does not exist. It is very small wonder that it is perilous indeed to explore such a lost realm** [p.105]**'** (*The Politics of Experience* and *The Bird of Paradise*, 1967).

Just as the debate over the question of God, meaning and purpose became evasively focused away onto irrelevant issues such as whether God has been destroyed by science's ability to explain the origins of the universe, the debate about consciousness has likewise become evasively focused away onto spurious questions like '*how do we know we are conscious?*' and '*how do we know other people are conscious?*'

The inhibiting subjective issue of the human condition aside, surely the real questions about consciousness are, '*what is consciousness?*' and '*why and how did it develop in humans?*'

What is Consciousness?

To respond to the question of '*what is consciousness?*' we need to consider—with the need for denial put aside—whether consciousness, like integrative meaning, is actually a simple and obvious phenomenon to explain.

Humans can be distinguished from other animals by the fact we are fully conscious, sufficiently able to understand the relationships between cause and effect to manage events to our own chosen ends.

This consciousness is a product of the nerve-based learning system's ability to remember, for it is memory that allows understanding of cause and effect to develop.

To elaborate, nerves were originally developed as connections for the coordination of movement in multicellular animals. An incidental by-product of the development of nerves was that of memory. Electric impulses that pass along a nerve pathway leave an imprint that can be accessed afterwards. This ability to store impressions formed the basis of memory and once you have memory you have the ability to develop understanding of cause and effect.

Nerves have the ability to remember past events, compare them with current events and identify regularly occurring experiences. This knowledge of, or insight into, what has commonly occurred in the past enables the mind to predict what is likely to occur in the future and to adjust behaviour accordingly. Thus, the nerve-based learning system, unlike the gene-based learning system, can associate information, reason how experiences are related, learn to understand and become conscious of the relationship of events that occur through time.