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LEVELS OF COGNITION: DID INDIAN PHILOSOPHERS KNOW SOMETHING WE DO NOT?

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Abstract ¹

This article argues that a model of the mind held by a number of Indian and Tibetan philosophical schools, both Brahmanical and Buddhist, could be extremely useful, even today, and has, if suitably adjusted, great explanatory power with regard to a number of phenomena that we usually call religious. According to this model, there are two fundamentally different levels of cognition: one “with conceptual constructs”, the other one without these. Slightly adjusted, the model comes close to predicting the following phenomena: the experiences of mystics, the almost universally attested use of ritual and of magical formulas, certain often recurring themes in mythology and philosophy, and the omnipresent conviction that there is a deeper reality hiding behind the world of our everyday experience. The article then discusses some possible objections one might raise against the model, and ends with a plea to take it seriously.

A number of Indian and Tibetan philosophical schools, both Brahmanical and Buddhist, share a notion that they adhere to in spite of their numerous mutual differences. All these schools maintain that there are two fundamentally different levels of cognition. One of these, they agree, is characterized by conceptual constructs: it is “with conceptual constructs” (*savikalpaka*); the other level is without these. All the philosophers concerned agree that our ordinary cognition is a mixture of the two levels, or perhaps more precisely, it is the result of superposing the level of cognition with conceptual constructs onto the level without conceptual constructs. They also agree that these conceptual constructs are due to the use of language. They do not all agree on the question whether it is possible to experience the level of cognition without conceptual constructs in its pure state, without the superposition of conceptual constructs. Some think this is not possible: for them the existence of a level of cognition without conceptual

1 This is the slightly modified text of a paper read at the Symposium “Why are humans religious?”, held at the University of Lausanne in June 2011.

constructs is inferred because it is a logical precondition for the existence of cognition with conceptual constructs. Others, and they are probably the majority, hold that cognition without conceptual constructs can actually be experienced, at least by some of us. They ascribe this experience to those who have made spiritual progress, most notably in the practice of mental absorption (*samādhi*). They further add that cognition without conceptual constructs is a direct, unmediated cognition of objects.²

To my knowledge, there is little in the history of Western thought that corresponds to this particular model of two levels of cognition so wide-spread in Indian and Tibetan thought.³ And yet, the claim I wish to make in this presentation is that this model of the mind could be extremely useful, and has, if suitably adjusted, great explanatory power with regard to a number of phenomena that we usually call religious. It is true that we cannot extract it without adjustments from its Indian and Tibetan context. With adjustments, however, it may allow us to make some major steps in the direction of a solution to the question why humans are religious.

I will proceed as follows. First I will try to expand the, in origin, Indian model in the light of some recent discussions in science and scholarship. Next I will illustrate the explanatory power of the expanded model. And finally, I will address one criticism in particular that might be raised against it.

First, then, the model has to be expanded. We need to know, more specifically, how we have to conceive of the level of cognition with conceptual constructs, and how it came about, both in our evolutionary past, phylogenetically, and in our individual growth from infancy to adulthood, ontogenetically. For answers to these questions I have drawn inspiration from Terrence Deacon's book *The Symbolic Species* (1997).

How should we think of cognition with conceptual constructs? Deacon's book shows how much is involved in acquiring language. Language acquisition requires far more than learning words corresponding to items in our surroundings. Words are symbols in the sense of Charles Sanders Peirce: they are not just related to their objects, they are elements in an extremely complex web. Learning to use language means mastering an immense web of associations that link each word to countless other words and mental representations. These mental representations can be thought of as being primarily created as a result of

2 See my article "A note on nirvikalpaka and savikalpaka perception" (BRONKHORST, 2011).

3 For some specifications of this observation, see below.

analysing verbal inputs. This happens typically when verbal utterances overlap: a child (or chimpanzee) confronted with the two sentences “pour water” and “pour Coca-cola” may figure out that the element “pour” is reusable and create a representation corresponding to it.

In our individual growth from infancy to adulthood this process requires “crossing the symbolic threshold”, a feat that other animals, including primates, can only accomplish with the greatest difficulty, if at all. In evolutionary terms, the acquisition of this competence went hand in hand, co-evolved, with the development and growth of certain parts of our brain, most notably the pre-frontal cortex.

How should we now conceive of the level of cognition with cognitive constructs? This level adds an extremely dense web of associations that henceforth colours our ordinary cognition. Once acquired, it becomes virtually impossible for us to see a banknote without assigning value to it, or to hear a sentence spoken in our mother tongue without understanding its meaning. This does not mean that there is no underlying cognition without conceptual constructs, but this underlying cognition is not experienced in its pure form, not at least by most of us.

We have already seen that, according to an important number of Indian and Tibetan philosophers, the level of cognition without conceptual constructs can be experienced, at least by some people. The method typically used to gain access to this experience is deep mental absorption. If we now recall that cognition with conceptual constructs is due to a dense web of associations, and that absorption (as all other forms of concentration) is characterized by the suppression of associations, the claim of these thinkers makes sense. Ordinary concentration reduces the number of associations, and the deeper the concentration, the more associations will be suppressed. If deep enough, this leads to cognition without associations, i.e., without conceptual constructs.

It may be clear from what precedes that the model of two levels of cognition is coherent, and is not obviously self-contradictory. My next claim is that it has great explanatory power with regard to phenomena often thought of as religious. Let us consider some instances.

The first corollary of the model here presented is not just that there are people who have access to cognition without conceptual constructs, but also that they will, when in such a state (or rather, when coming out of it), claim to experience the world in a totally different fashion. They may, for example, see a banknote as the piece of paper it is, and hear a spoken utterance as the sequence

of sounds it is. In fact, the literature of various cultural and religious traditions brings to light a large number of such claims, which often speak of a different reality altogether. What is more, the additional claim is often made that this reality is beyond words, and cannot therefore be described in words; it is ineffable. The claim of an altogether different reality is not surprising, for to know that one observes the same thing, one needs a memory association with earlier observations; and these associations are supposedly absent or reduced in cognition without conceptual constructs. The claim that this reality is beyond words is a clear confirmation that cognition without conceptual constructs is involved. We may conclude that the almost universal human claim that there is a higher reality that somehow hides behind the world of our experience fits in very well with the model here presented.⁴

Note, incidentally, that this claim is not only upheld by mystics and yogis, people who may conceivably have had the experience of cognition without conceptual constructs. Mystics and yogis may, through effort or circumstances, be able to reach deeper states of concentration than most of us (states that I refer to as absorption), this does not change the fact that all of us can, and do, reach states of concentration on a daily basis. Seen in the light of the model here presented, this means that the thickness of the web of associations varies, for each of us, all the time. The conviction that there is a reality different from the ordinary one is in this way supported by everyday experience, even if to a lesser degree than in the case of the spiritual virtuosos mentioned earlier.

Our model explains more. The creation of cognition with conceptual constructs in our early childhood went hand in hand with the analysis of linguistic utterances. The holistic notion connected with the phrase “pour water” was divided up into separate representations corresponding to “pour” and “water”. Our ordinary cognition, i.e., the cognition with conceptual constructs, is due to this division of phrases into words, and of the world into representations. The higher reality just mentioned is connected with the undivided world to which we had access when “pour water” had not yet been divided into separate representations. At some level we are aware of this, and this explains a number of features that characterize religion in many of its forms.

4 The conviction that there is a higher reality that hides behind the world of every-day experience may also be a motivating factor behind much that we call science, including the search for a reality that may be forever hidden from us; see e.g. GREENE, 2011.

Consider the mythological and philosophical theme according to which the world was originally whole and undivided. Creation consisted in the division of this originally undivided world into the parts familiar from our daily experience. This wide-spread theme makes a lot of sense if we grant that the process we all went through in childhood (“crossing the symbolic threshold”) has left its traces and lends intuitive plausibility to narratives that present it in modified form.

The same search for the original whole finds expression in ritual and magical formulas. Their holistic nature is well-known and has often been commented upon by scholars. These holistic utterances, in which the meaning of the constituent words plays no role, give access to a higher reality, unsurprisingly so in the light of our model.

Ritual itself illustrates the importance of undivided wholes. Whatever definitions scholars have proposed for ritual acts, a recognized recurring feature is that they are wholes that cannot be divided. Once again, we are faced with a holistic structure that supposedly gives access to a higher reality.

Apart from explaining the features just mentioned, the model of two levels of cognition fits in well with the position presented by certain neuro-scientists on the basis of their researches. Antonio Damasio, to take an example, distinguishes between two kinds of consciousness, which he calls core consciousness and extended consciousness.⁵ Gerald Edelman speaks about primary consciousness and higher-order consciousness.⁶ Without wishing to enter into a detailed discussion of the reasons that make these neuro-scientists introduce their ideas of a double-layered consciousness, it seems clear that their notions provide support, be it partial support, to the theory here presented.⁷

Also Deacon and Cashman, in a recent article (2009), recognize that there is

a predisposition to conceive of the world as two-layered, so that some objects and events of mundane experience are like signs expressing meanings that concern a hidden and more fundamental level of existence (p. 490).

5 DAMASIO, 1999: 168 ff.

6 EDELMAN, 2004: 8 f. and passim.

7 EVANS's (2003; 2008) “dual-processing” does not quite correspond to the two levels of cognition here discussed. DONALD, 2001 (chapter 5) speaks of three levels of awareness. Level-3 is subject to enculturation (chapter 6) and corresponds, by and large, to our level with conceptual constructs; level-1 and level-2 correspond roughly to our level without conceptual constructs.

Later on in the same article they say that

a predisposition to see things as symbols implicitly casts things and events as comprehensible in terms of some other more fundamental realm, for example, hidden spiritual or supernatural realities that underlie the phenomenal world (p. 496).

All this agrees with what I have been saying so far, but is not quite the same. Deacon and Cashman accept a predisposition to conceive of the world as two-layered, they do not say that cognition actually is two-layered. They say the following about this predisposition (p. 495):

This strong attentional predisposition to look for hidden symbolic regulatory relationships beneath the surface appearance of communications allows us automatically to treat symbols as buoys marking positions within an implicit submerged meaningful and relational landscape. The aspect of language expressed in the physical world, therefore, only makes sense as an expression of a more basic invisible conceptual world.

In other words, they speak about an invisible conceptual world where I propose a non-conceptual world that is, when all is said and done, not invisible but visible.

There is, as far as I can see, no contradiction between the model proposed by Deacon and Cashman, on the one hand, and the one presented in this paper, on the other. The two may even complement each other in a most useful fashion. Indeed, the non-conceptual cognition of my model may be behind the widespread conviction that the invisible conceptual world of Deacon and Cashman is more real than the ordinary physical world. This conviction is well known to Deacon and Cashman, who give examples from different cultures to illustrate it (p. 505 ff.). However, they do not explain how its presence is to be explained.⁸ Our model may do so.

We have to move on. I hope to have convinced you that a number of otherwise disconnected and unexplained aspects of what is commonly termed religion make sense against the background of the model I have presented. The experiences of mystics, the almost universally attested use of ritual and of magical formulas, certain often recurring themes in mythology and philosophy, and of course the omnipresent conviction that there is a deeper reality hiding behind the world of our everyday experience, all of these are almost predictable on the basis

8 DEACON / CASHMAN have a great deal to say about religious emotions.

of the model of two levels of cognition here presented.⁹ Since to the best of my knowledge no other theories exist that explain in such simple terms so many disparate phenomena, this would seem to be a good reason to accept the model.

However, there is a problem, and the remainder of this paper will deal with it. The model here presented runs counter to current intellectual fashion. Current intellectual fashion is associated with the “interpretive turn” in scholarship, which harbours the claim that “all understanding is interpretation”.¹⁰ Our model implies that reports of mystical, yogic or other religious (and non-religious) experiences have to be taken seriously and point to forms of uninterpreted or not yet interpreted cognition. Our model does not, of course, maintain that reports, say, of manifestations of the Virgin Mary should be taken literally. But it does take into consideration the claim that these experiences are rooted in a reality that is as real, or rather more real, than our ordinary world. Some of you may feel profoundly suspicious about this.

I do not need to remind you that there are two positions in the study of mysticism that are each other’s radical opposites. There are, on one hand, those who maintain that the mystic’s very experiences (and not just his or her reports on these experiences) are culturally conditioned,¹¹ and on the other there are

9 For a fuller presentation of the theory and its implications, see BRONKHORST, 2010.

10 The argument supporting this claim is circular. Cp. SHUSTERMAN, 1991: 115–116: “Briefly and roughly, the argument goes as follows. All understanding is linguistic, because all understanding (as indeed all experience) involves concepts that require language. But linguistic understanding is essentially a matter of decoding or interpreting signs that are arbitrary rather than natural and whose translation into meaningful propositions thus requires interpretation. To understand the meaning of a sentence, we need [...] to supply a translation or interpretation of it in terms already familiar to us [...]. [Hans-Georg] Gadamer concurs [with Donald Davidson] by basing the universal scope of hermeneutics on ‘the essential linguisticity of all human experience of the world’ and on the view of language as ‘itself the game of interpretation that we are all engaged in every day.’ Hence, not only all understanding but all experience is interpretive, since both are ineliminably linguistic – a conclusion endorsed by Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, and a legion of hermeneutic universalists.” Our theory shows that there is nothing self-evident about the assumption that all understanding and all experience is linguistic. SHUSTERMAN agrees, and adds (p. 118): “We philosophers fail to see this because, disembodied talking heads that we are, the only form of experience we recognize and legitimate is linguistic: thinking, talking, writing.”

11 Steven KATZ (“There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences”) is a key representative of this view; cf. HORGAN, 2003: 41 ff. In his own words, KATZ, 2000: 3, proposed a new paradigm for the decipherment of mysticism: “this paradigm, which is most simply described as ‘contextualist’, repudiated the older ‘essentialist’ model, which argued that (a) mystical experience was essentially independent of the sociocultural, historical, and reli-

those who don't hold this view in its most extreme form.¹² The second position is not at present taken very seriously by researchers, who may look upon those who adhere to it as romantics.¹³ This is not unconnected with the "interpretive turn" in scholarship, already mentioned. We should however remember that these two positions concerning the interpretation of mystical experience are and remain no more than positions, not based on solid evidence but rather on fashion, ideology and personal preference. And you will agree that prejudice and name-calling are not the way to settle scientific disagreements: the matter merits more serious attention.

I repeat, and emphasize, that the two positions just mentioned are philosophical positions that, as such, may not be susceptible to proof or disproof (at least, not as yet). In cruder terms this means that they are hardly better than prejudices, positions adopted for ideological or personal reasons. You may think that this is the end of the debate: either you believe that religious and related experiences are in all details culturally conditioned, or you believe that below the cultural veneer there is an element that is not culturally conditioned, but that there is no way to prove either way. If you think so, I think you are wrong. Theories are not only tested by concentrating on isolated points. A theory can be preferred because it has greater explanatory power than its competitors. Consider Newton's theory of gravity. Among its many virtues, not the least is that it managed to explain in terms of one single theory hitherto unconnected phenomena: Newton's theory explained both sublunary phenomena (such as falling apples) and celestial phenomena (such as the elliptical motions of planets around the sun). Its explanatory power went in this way beyond the Aristotelian notions that had preceded it, and Newton's theory was therefore, rightly, preferred to the Aristotelian alternative.¹⁴

In our present discussion, the theory of the two levels of cognition brings a number of phenomena under a common denominator: mystical claims, ritual practice, magical formulas, recurring mythical and philosophical notions, and

gious context in which it occurred and (b) all mystical experience, at its highest and purest level, was essentially the same."

- 12 One might expect that the theory of the two levels of cognition would find expression in the extensive literature on mysticism that does not accept KATZ's constructivist position, but this does not appear to be the case.
- 13 Note however that the article "Mysticism" in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mysticism/>>; latest revision Feb 9, 2010) presents a number of arguments against both "soft" and "hard constructivism" (§ 6).
- 14 See, e.g., HENRY, 1997: 21; BERLINSKI, 2001: 126 ff.

the shared conviction that there is a deeper reality. No competing view that I am aware of does the same.

The day may come when more sophisticated interpretations of neurological data will be able to adjudicate between different theoretical positions. This day may not yet have come, even though we have seen that some neuro-scientists of repute have of their own come up with ideas that are not dissimilar to the theory here presented. In the present state of our knowledge, the least one can say is that the theory of the two levels of cognition merits serious consideration. In my opinion, it is more than capable of standing up to its competitors.

I would like to suggest, then, that there is a theory available that, at least in principle, gets us close to an answer to the question “Why are humans religious?”. The explanatory power of this theory seems to me far greater than that of any of its competitors, supposing that we can speak of serious competitors at all. However, those Hardliners who are determined to ignore first person reports will remain deprived of this simple and elegant answer to our question.

The temptation for scientifically inclined investigators of the human mind to ignore introspection and first person reports is understandable. First person accounts of experiences are notoriously difficult to interpret, and are likely to be influenced by beliefs and prejudices that the scientifically inclined researcher does not share with his subjects. I agree, moreover, with the Hardliners that the mere analysis of first person reports is not likely to get us anywhere; indeed, it has not gotten us anywhere so far, in spite of the numerous participants in the debate. But then, I do think that most of these participants overlooked what Karl Popper called “the logic of scientific discovery”: theory is tested against the evidence but is not derived from it. As someone put it, “objectively weighing peoples’ earlobes would likely not be making any significant contribution to science unless some theoretical proposition had made the weight of peoples’ earlobes important.”¹⁵ The mere analysis of first person reports of mystics is not likely to get us anywhere, and has so far led us nowhere. What I propose is something quite different. I propose a theory in which certain aspects of first person reports of mystics find a natural place, beside much else. This theory logically precedes the observations and is not derived from them, exactly as it should be.

What can we conclude from all this? I think that the model of two levels of cognition first elaborated in Indian schools of philosophy is to be taken seri-

15 A. F. CHALMERS as cited by GEERTZ, 1999: 452.

ously, not because it is Indian, nor even for the reasons that made Indian thinkers adopt it, but quite simply because it makes sense of this most peculiar of human behaviours: that of being religious.

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