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Experiments in Consciousness

AT THE CORE of every religion lies an undeniable claim about the human condition: it is possible to have one's experience of the world radically transformed. Although we generally live within the limits imposed by our ordinary uses of attention—we wake, we work, we eat, we watch television, we converse with others, we sleep, we dream—most of us know, however dimly, that extraordinary experiences are possible.

The problem with religion is that it blends this truth so thoroughly with the venom of unreason. Take Christianity as an example: it is not enough that Jesus was a man who transformed himself to such a degree that the Sermon on the Mount could be his heart's confession. He also had to be the Son of God, born of a virgin, and destined to return to earth trailing clouds of glory. The effect of such dogma is to place the example of Jesus forever out of reach. His teaching ceases to be a set of empirical claims about the linkage between ethics and spiritual insight and instead becomes a gratuitous, and rather gruesome, fairy tale. According to the dogma of Christianity, becoming just like Jesus is impossible. One can only enumerate one's sins, believe the unbelievable, and await the end of the world.

But a more profound response to existence is possible for us, and the testimony of Jesus, as well as that of countless other men and women over the ages, attests to this. The challenge for us is to begin talking about this possibility in rational terms.

The Search for Happiness

Though the lilies of the field are admirably clothed, you and I were driven from the womb naked and squalling. What do we need to be happy? Almost everything we do can be viewed as a reply to this question. We need food, shelter, and clothing. We need the company of others. Then we need to learn countless things to make the most of this company. We need to find work that we enjoy, and we need time for leisure. We need so many things, and there seems no alternative but to seek and maintain them, one after the next, hour after hour.

But are such things *sufficient* for happiness? Is a person guaranteed to be happy merely by virtue of having health, wealth, and good company? Apparently not. Are such things even *necessary* for happiness? If so, what can we make of those Indian yogis who renounce all material and familial attachments only to spend decades alone in caves practicing meditation? It seems that such people can be happy as well. Indeed, some of them claim to be perfectly so.

It is difficult to find a word for that human enterprise which aims at happiness directly—at happiness of a sort that can survive the frustration of all conventional desires. The term "spirituality" seems unavoidable here—and I have used it several times in this book already—but it has many connotations that are, frankly, embarrassing. "Mysticism" has more gravitas, perhaps, but it has unfortunate associations of its own. Neither word captures the reasonableness and profundity of the possibility that we must now consider: that there is a form of well-being that supersedes all others, indeed, that transcends the vagaries of experience itself. I will use both "spirituality" and "mysticism" interchangeably here, because there are no alternatives, but the reader should remember that I am using them in a restricted sense. While a visit to any New Age bookstore will reveal that modern man has embraced a daunting range of "spiritual" preoccupations—ranging from the healing power of crystals and colonic irrigation to the ardors of alien abduction—our

discussion will focus on a specific insight that seems to have special relevance to our pursuit of happiness.

Most spiritual teachings agree that there is more to happiness than becoming a productive member of society, a cheerful consumer of every licit pleasure, and an enthusiastic bearer of children disposed to do the same. Indeed, many suggest that it is our *search* for happiness—our craving for knowledge and new experience, our desire for recognition, our efforts to find the right romantic partner, even our yearning for spiritual experience itself—that causes us to overlook a form of well-being that is intrinsic to consciousness in every present moment. Some version of this insight seems to lie at the core of many of our religions, and yet it is by no means always easy to discern among the articles of faith.

While many of us go for decades without experiencing a full day of solitude, we live every moment in the solitude of our own minds. However close we may be to others, our pleasures and pains are ours alone. Spiritual practice is often recommended as the most rational response to this situation. The underlying claim here is that we can realize something about the nature of consciousness in this moment that will improve our lives. The experience of countless contemplatives suggests that consciousness—being merely the condition in which thought, emotion, and even our sense of self arises—is never actually changed by what it knows. That which is aware of joy does not become joyful; that which is aware of sadness does not become sad. From the point of view of consciousness, we are merely aware of sights, sounds, sensations, moods, and thoughts. Many spiritual teachings allege that if we can recognize our identity as consciousness itself, as the mere witness of appearances, we will realize that we stand perpetually free of the vicissitudes of experience.

This is not to deny that suffering has a physical dimension. The fact that a drug like Prozac can relieve many of the symptoms of depression suggests that mental suffering can be no more ethereal than a little green pill. But the arrow of influence clearly flies both ways. We know that ideas themselves have the power to utterly

define a person's experience of the world.¹ Even the significance of intense physical pain is open to subjective interpretation. Consider the pain of labor: How many women come away from the experience traumatized? The occasion itself is generally a happy one, assuming all goes well with the birth. Imagine how different it would be for a woman to be tortured by having the sensations of a normal labor inflicted upon her by a mad scientist. The sensations might be identical, and yet this would certainly be among the worst experiences of her life. There is clearly more to suffering even physical pain than painful sensation alone.

Our spiritual traditions suggest that we have considerable room here to change our relationship to the contents of consciousness, and thereby to transform our experience of the world. Indeed, a vast literature on human spirituality attests to this.² It is also clear that nothing need be believed on insufficient evidence for us to look into this possibility with an open mind.

Consciousness

Like Descartes, most of us begin these inquiries as *thinkers*, condemned by the terms of our subjectivity to maneuver in a world that appears to be other than what we are. Descartes accentuated this dichotomy by declaring that two substances were to be found in God's universe: matter and spirit. For most of us, a dualism of this sort is more or less a matter of common sense (though the term "spirit" seems rather majestic, given how our minds generally comport themselves). As science has turned its reifying light upon the mysteries of the human mind, however, Descartes' dualism (along with our own "folk psychology") has come in for some rough treatment. Bolstered by the undeniable successes of three centuries of purely physical research, many philosophers and scientists now reject Descartes' separation of mind and body, spirit and matter, as the concession to Christian piety that it surely was, and imagine that

they have thereby erased the conceptual gulf between consciousness and the physical world.

In the last chapter we saw that our beliefs about consciousness are intimately linked to our ethics. They also happen to have a direct bearing upon our view of death. Most scientists consider themselves *physicalists*; this means, among other things, that they believe that our mental and spiritual lives are wholly dependent upon the workings of our brains. On this account, when the brain dies, the stream of our being must come to an end. Once the lamps of neural activity have been extinguished, there will be nothing left to survive. Indeed, many scientists purvey this conviction as though it were itself a special sacrament, conferring intellectual integrity upon any man, woman, or child who is man enough to swallow it.

But the truth is that we simply do not know what happens after death. While there is much to be said against a naive conception of a soul that is independent of the brain,³ the place of consciousness in the natural world is very much an open question. The idea that brains *produce* consciousness is little more than an article of faith among scientists at present, and there are many reasons to believe that the methods of science will be insufficient to either prove or disprove it.

Inevitably, scientists treat consciousness as a mere *attribute* of certain large-brained animals. The problem, however, is that nothing about a brain, when surveyed as a physical system, declares it to be a bearer of that peculiar, interior dimension that each of us experiences as consciousness in his own case. Every paradigm that attempts to shed light upon the frontier between consciousness and unconsciousness, searching for the physical difference that makes the phenomenal one, relies upon subjective reports to signal that an experimental stimulus has been observed.⁴ The operational definition of consciousness, therefore, is *reportability*. But consciousness and reportability are not the same. Is a starfish conscious? No science that conflates consciousness with reportability will deliver an answer to this question. To look for consciousness in the world on

the basis of its outward signs is the only thing that we can do. To *define* consciousness in terms of its outward signs, however, is a fallacy. Computers of the future, sufficiently advanced to pass the Turing test,* will offer up a wealth of self-report—but will they be conscious? If we don't already know, their eloquence on the matter will not decide the issue. Consciousness may be a far more rudimentary phenomenon than are living creatures and their brains. And there appears to be no obvious way of ruling out such a thesis experimentally.⁵

And so, while we know many things about ourselves in anatomical, physiological, and evolutionary terms, we currently have no idea why it is "like something" to be what we are. The fact that the universe is illuminated where you stand, the fact that your thoughts and moods and sensations have a qualitative character, is an absolute mystery—rivaled only by the mystery, famously articulated by the philosopher Schelling, that there should be anything at all in this universe rather than nothing. The problem is that our experience *of* brains, as objects in the world, leaves us perfectly insensible to the reality of consciousness, while our experience *as* brains grants us knowledge of nothing else. **Given this situation, it is reasonable to conclude that the domain of our subjectivity constitutes a proper (and essential) sphere of investigation into the nature of the universe: as some facts will be discovered only in consciousness, in first-person terms, or not discovered at all.**

Investigating the nature of consciousness directly, through sustained introspection, is simply another name for spiritual practice. It should be clear that whatever transformations of your experience are possible—after forty days and forty nights in the desert, after

* The mathematician Alan Turing once proposed a test for the adequacy of a computer simulation of the human mind (and this has since been promoted in the literature to a test for computer "consciousness"). The proposed test requires that a human subject interrogate another person and a computer by turns, without knowing which is which. If, at the end of the experiment, he cannot identify the computer with any confidence, it is said to have "passed" the Turing test.

twenty years in a cave, or after some new serotonin agonist has been delivered to your synapses—these will be a matter of changes occurring in the contents of your consciousness. Whatever Jesus experienced, he experienced as consciousness. If he loved his neighbor as himself, this is a description of what it felt like to be Jesus while in the presence of other human beings. **The history of human spirituality is the history of our attempts to explore and modify the deliverances of consciousness through methods like fasting, chanting, sensory deprivation, prayer, meditation, and the use of psychotropic plants.** There is no question that experiments of this sort can be conducted in a rational manner. Indeed, they are some of our only means of determining to what extent the human condition can be deliberately transformed. **Such an enterprise becomes irrational only when people begin making claims about the world that cannot be supported by empirical evidence.**

What Are We Calling "I"?

Our spiritual possibilities will largely depend on what we are as *selves*. In physical terms, each of us is a system, locked in an uninterrupted exchange of matter and energy with the larger system of the earth. The life of your very cells is built upon a network of barter and exchange over which you can exercise only the crudest conscious influence—in the form of deciding whether to hold your breath or take another slice of pizza out of the fridge. As a physical system, you are no more independent of nature at this moment than your liver is of the rest of your body. As a collection of self-regulating and continually dividing cells, you are also continuous with your genetic precursors: your parents, their parents, and backward through tens of millions of generations—at which point your ancestors begin looking less like men and women with bad teeth and more like pond scum. It is true enough to say that, in physical terms, you are little more than an eddy in a great river of life.

But, of course, your body is itself an environment teeming with creatures, in relation to which you are sovereign in name alone. To examine the body of a person, its organs and tissues, cells and intestinal flora (sometimes fauna, alas), is to be confronted by a world that bears no more evidence of an overriding conscious intelligence than does the world at large. **Is there any reason to suspect, when observing the function of mitochondria within a cell, or the twitching of muscle fibers in the hand, that there is a mind, above and beyond such processes, thinking, "L'état c'est moi"?** Indeed, **any privilege we might be tempted to accord the boundary of the skin in our search for the physical self seems profoundly arbitrary.**

The frontiers of the mental self are no easier to discern: memes, taboos, norms of decorum, linguistic conventions, prejudices, ideals, aesthetic biases, commercial jingles—the phenomena that populate the landscape of our minds are immigrants from the world at large. Is your desire to be physically fit—or your taste in clothing, your sense of community, your expectation of reciprocal kindness, your shyness, your affability, your sexual quirks, etc.—something that originates with you? Is it something best thought of as residing *in* you? These phenomena are the direct result of your embeddedness in a world of social relationships and culture (as well as a product of your genes). Many of them seem to be no more "you," ultimately, than the rules of English grammar are.

And yet, this feeling of being a self persists. If the term "I" refers to anything at all, it does not refer simply to the *body*. After all, most of us feel individuated as a self *within* the body. I speak of "my" body more or less as I speak of "my" car, for the simple reason that every act of perception or cognition conveys the tacit sense that the knower is something other than the thing known. Just as my awareness *of* my car demonstrates that I, as a subject, am something other than it, as an object, I can be aware of my hand, or an emotion, and experience the same cleavage between subject and object. For this reason, the self cannot simply be equated with the totality of a person's mental life or with his personality as a whole.⁶ Rather, it is the point of

view around which the changing states of his mind and body appear to be constellated. Whatever the relationship between consciousness and the body actually is, in experiential terms the body is something to which the conscious self, if such there be, stands *in relation*. Exactly when, in evolutionary or developmental terms, this point of view emerges is not known, but one thing is clear: at some point in the first years of life most human beings are christened as "I," the perennial subject, for whom all appearances, inside and out, become objects of a kind, waiting to be known. And it is as "I" that every scientist begins his inquiry into the nature of the world and every pious man folds his hands in prayer.⁷

THE sense of self seems to be the product of the brain's representing its own acts of representation; its seeing of the world begets an image of a *one who sees*. It is important to realize that this feeling—the sense that each of us has of *appropriating*, rather than merely *being*, a sphere of experience—is not a necessary feature of consciousness. It is, after all, conceivable that a creature could form a representation of the world without forming a representation of *itself* in the world. And, indeed, many spiritual practitioners claim to experience the world in just this way, perfectly shorn of self.

A basic finding of neurophysiology lends credence to such claims. It is not so much what they *are* but what they *do* that makes neurons see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think, and feel. Like any other function that emerges from the activity of the brain, the feeling of self is best thought of as a *process*. It is not very surprising, therefore, that we can lose this feeling, because processes, by their very nature, can be interrupted. While the experience of selflessness does not indicate anything about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world (and is thus mute on the question of what happens after death), it has broad implications for the sciences of mind, for our approach to spirituality, and for our conception of human happiness.

As a mental phenomenon, loss of self is not as rare as our scholarly neglect of it suggests. This experience is characterized by a

sudden loss of subject/object perception: the continuum of experience remains, but one no longer feels that there is a knower standing apart from the known. Thoughts may arise, but the feeling that one is the thinker of these thoughts has vanished. Something has definitely changed at the level of one's moment-to-moment experience, and this change—the disappearance of anything to which the pronoun "I" can be faithfully attached—signals that there had been a conscious experience of selfhood all the while, however difficult it may be to characterize.

Look at this book as a physical object. You are aware *of* it as an appearance in consciousness. You may feel that your consciousness is one thing—it is whatever illuminates your world from some point behind your eyes, perhaps—and the book is another. This is the kind of dualistic (subject/object) perception that characterizes our normal experience of life. It is possible, however, to look for your self in such a way as to put this subject/object dichotomy in doubt—and even to banish it altogether.

The contents of consciousness—sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, moods, etc.—whatever they are at the level of the brain, are merely *expressions* of consciousness at the level of our experience. Unrecognized as such, many of these appearances seem to impinge upon consciousness from without, and the sense of self emerges, and grows entrenched, as the feeling that *that which knows* is circumscribed, modified, and often oppressed by *that which is known*. Indeed, it is likely that our parents found us in our cribs long before we found ourselves there, and that we were merely led by their gaze, and their pointing fingers, to coalesce around an implied center of cognition that does not, in fact, exist.⁸ **Thereafter, every maternal caress, every satisfaction of hunger or thirst, as well as the diverse forms of approval and rebuke that came in reply to the actions of our embodied minds, seemed to confirm a self-sense that we, by example, finally learned to call "I"—and thus we became the narrow locus around which all things and events, pleasant and unpleasant, continue to swirl.**

In subjective terms, the search for the self seems to entail a

paradox: we are, after all, looking for the very thing that is doing the looking. Thousands of years of human experience suggests, however, that the paradox here is only apparent: it is not merely that the component of our experience that we call "I" cannot be found; it is that it actually disappears when looked for in a rigorous way.

THE foregoing is just a gloss on the phenomenology here, but it should be sufficient to get us started. The basic (and, I think, uncontested) fact is that almost every human being experiences the duality of subject and object in some measure, and most of us feel it powerfully nearly every moment of our lives. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the feeling that we call "I" is one of the most pervasive and salient features of human life: and its effects upon the world, as six billion "selves" pursue diverse and often incompatible ends, rival those that can be ascribed to almost any other phenomenon in nature. Clearly, there is nothing optimal—or even necessarily *viable*—about our present form of subjectivity. **Almost every problem we have can be ascribed to the fact that human beings are utterly beguiled by their feelings of separateness.** It would seem that a spirituality that undermined such dualism, through the mere contemplation of consciousness, could not help but improve our situation. Whether or not great numbers of human beings will ever be in a position to explore this terrain depends on how our discourse on religion proceeds. **There is clearly no greater obstacle to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience than our current beliefs about God.**

The Wisdom of the East

Inevitably, the foregoing will strike certain readers as a confusing eruption of speculative philosophy. This is unfortunate, for none of it has been speculative or even particularly philosophical—at least

not in the sense that this term has acquired in the West. Thousands of years have passed since any Western philosopher imagined that a person should be made happy, peaceful, or even wise, in the ordinary sense, by his search for truth.⁹ Personal transformation, or indeed liberation from the illusion of the self, seems to have been thought too much to ask: or rather, not thought of at all. Consequently, many of us in the West are conceptually unequipped to understand empirical claims of the sort adduced above.

In fact, the spiritual differences between the East and the West are every bit as shocking as the material differences between the North and the South. Jared Diamond's fascinating thesis, to sum it up in a line, is that advanced civilization did not arise in sub-Saharan Africa, because one can't saddle a rhinoceros and ride it into battle.¹⁰ If there is an equally arresting image that accounts for why nondualistic, empirical mysticism seems to have arisen only in Asia, I have yet to find it. But I suspect that the culprit has been the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim emphasis on faith itself. Faith is rather like a rhinoceros, in fact: it won't do much in the way of real work for you, and yet at close quarters it will make spectacular claims upon your attention.

This is not to say that spiritual realization has been a common attainment east of the Bosphorus. Clearly, it has not. It must also be conceded that Asia has always had its fair share of false prophets and charlatan saints, while the West has not been entirely bereft of wisdom.¹¹ Nevertheless, when the great philosopher mystics of the East are weighed against the patriarchs of the Western philosophical and theological traditions, the difference is unmistakable: Buddha, Shankara, Padmasambhava, Nagarjuna, Longchenpa, and countless others down to the present have no equivalents in the West. In spiritual terms, we appear to have been standing on the shoulders of dwarfs. It is little wonder, therefore, that many Western scholars have found the view within rather unremarkable.¹²

While this is not a treatise on Eastern spirituality, it does not seem out of place to briefly examine the differences between the Eastern and the Western canons, for they are genuinely startling. To

illustrate this point, I have selected a passage at random from a shelf of Buddhist literature. The following text was found with closed eyes, on the first attempt, from among scores of books. I invite the reader to find anything even remotely like this in the Bible or the Koran.

[I]n the present moment, when (your mind) remains in its own condition without constructing anything, Awareness at that moment in itself is quite ordinary. And when you look into yourself in this way nakedly (without any discursive thoughts), Since there is only this pure observing, there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer; Only a naked manifest awareness is present. (This awareness) is empty and immaculately pure, not being created by anything whatsoever. It is authentic and unadulterated, without any duality of clarity and emptiness. It is not permanent and yet it is not created by anything. However, it is not a mere nothingness or something annihilated because it is lucid and present. It does not exist as a single entity because it is present and clear in terms of being many. (On the other hand) it is not created as a multiplicity of things because it is inseparable and of a single flavor. This inherent self-awareness does not derive from anything outside itself. This is the real introduction to the actual condition of things.

—*Padmasambhava*¹³

One could live an eon as a Christian, a Muslim, or a Jew and never encounter any teachings like this about the nature of consciousness. The comparison with Islam is especially invidious, because Padmasambhava was virtually Muhammad's contemporary.¹⁴ While the

meaning of the above passage might not be perfectly apparent to all readers—it is just a section of a longer teaching on the nature of mind and contains a fair amount of Buddhist jargon ("clarity," "emptiness," "single flavor," etc.)—it is a rigorously empirical document, not a statement of metaphysics. Even the contemporary literature on consciousness, which spans philosophy, cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience, cannot match the kind of precise, phenomenological studies that can be found throughout the Buddhist canon. Although we have no reason to be dogmatically attached to any one tradition of spiritual instruction, we should not imagine that they are all equally wise or equally sophisticated. They are not. **Mysticism, to be viable, requires *explicit* instructions, which need suffer no more ambiguity or artifice in their exposition than we find in a manual for operating a lawn mower.¹⁵ Some traditions realized this millennia ago. Others did not.**

Meditation

Most techniques of introspection that aim at uncovering the intrinsic properties of consciousness are referred to as methods of meditation. To be told that a person is "meditating," however, is to be given almost no information at all about the content of his experience. **"Meditation," in the sense that I use it here, refers to any means whereby our sense of "self"—of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition—can be made to vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of experience.¹⁶**

Inevitably, the primary obstacle to meditation is *thinking*. This leads many people to assume that the goal of meditation is to produce a thought-free state. It is true that some experiences entail the temporary cessation of thought, but meditation is less a matter of suppressing thoughts than of breaking our identification with them, so that we can recognize the condition in which thoughts themselves arise. Western scientists and philosophers generally imagine that

thinking is the epitome of conscious life and would no sooner have a mind without thoughts than hands without fingers. The fundamental insight of most Eastern schools of spirituality, however, is that while thinking is a practical necessity, the failure to recognize thoughts *as thoughts*, moment after moment, is what gives each of us the feeling that we call "I," and this is the string upon which all our states of suffering and dissatisfaction are strung.¹⁷ This is an empirical claim, not a matter of philosophical speculation. Break the spell of thought, and the duality of subject and object will vanish—as will the fundamental difference between conventional states of happiness and suffering. This is a fact about the mind that few Western scholars have ever made it their business to understand.

It is on this front that the practice of meditation reveals itself to be both intellectually serious and indispensable. There is something to realize about the nature of consciousness, and its realization does not entail thinking new thoughts. Like any skill that requires refinements in perception or cognition, the task of recognizing consciousness prior to the subject/object dichotomy can be facilitated by an expert.¹⁸ But it is, at least in principle, an experience that is available to anyone.

You are now seated, reading this book. Your past is a memory. Your future is a matter of mere expectation. Both memories and expectations can arise in consciousness only as thoughts in the present moment.

Of course, reading is itself a species of thinking. You can probably hear the sound of your own voice reading these words in your mind. These sentences do not feel like *your* thoughts, however. Your thoughts are the ones that arrive unannounced and steal you away from the text. They may have some relevance to what you are now reading—you may think, "Didn't he just contradict himself there?"—or they may have no relevance at all. You may suddenly find yourself thinking about tonight's dinner, or about an argument

you had days ago, even while your eyes still blindly scan lines of text. We all know what it is like to read whole paragraphs, and even pages of a book without assimilating a word. Few of us realize that we spend most of our lives in such a state: perceiving the present—present sights, sounds, tastes, and sensations—only dimly, through a veil of thought. We spend our lives telling ourselves the story of past and future, while the reality of the present goes largely unexplored. Now we live in ignorance of the freedom and simplicity of consciousness, prior to the arising of thought.

Your consciousness, while still inscrutable in scientific terms, is an utter simplicity as a matter of experience. It merely stands before you, *as* you, and as everything else that appears to your notice. You see this book. You hear a variety of sounds. You feel the sensations of your body in space. And then thoughts of past and future arise, endure for a time, and pass away.

If you will persistently look for the subject of your experience, however, its absence may become apparent, if only for a moment. Everything will remain—this book, your hands—and yet the illusory divide that once separated knower from known, self from world, inside from outside, will have vanished. This experience has been at the core of human spirituality for millennia. There is nothing we need believe to actualize it. We need only look closely enough at what we are calling "I."

Once the selflessness of consciousness has been glimpsed, spiritual life can be viewed as a matter of freeing one's attention more and more so that this recognition can become stabilized. This is where the connection between spirituality and ethics becomes inescapable. A vast literature on meditation suggests that negative social emotions such as hatred, envy, and spite both proceed from and ramify our dualistic perception of the world. Emotions such as love and compassion, on the other hand, seem to make our minds very pliable in meditative terms, and it is increasingly easy to concentrate under their influences. It does not seem surprising that it would be easier to free one's attention from the contents of thought,

and simply abide as consciousness, if one's basic attitude toward other human beings were positive and if one had established relationships on this basis. Lawsuits, feuds, intricate deceptions, and being shackled and brought to The Hague for crimes against humanity are not among the requisites for stability in meditation. It also seems a matter of common sense that the more the feeling of selfhood is relaxed, the less those states that are predicated upon it will arise—states like fear and anger. Scientists are making their first attempts to test claims of this sort, but every experienced meditator has tested them already.¹⁹ While much of the scientific research done on meditation has approached it as little more than a tool for stress reduction, there is no question that the phenomenon of selflessness has begun to make its way into the charmed circle of third-person, experimental science.²⁰

As in any other field, spiritual intuitions are amenable to intersubjective consensus, and refutation. Just as mathematicians can enjoy mutually intelligible dialogue on abstract ideas (though they will not always agree about what is intuitively "obvious"), just as athletes can communicate effectively about the pleasures of sport, mystics can consensually elucidate the data of their sphere. Thus, genuine mysticism can be "objective"—in the only normative sense of this word that is worth retaining—in that it need not be contaminated by dogma.²¹ As a phenomenon to be studied, spiritual experience is no more refractory than dreams, emotions, perceptual illusions, or, indeed, thoughts themselves.²²

A STRANGE future awaits us: mind-reading machines, genuine virtual reality, neural implants, and increasingly refined drugs may all have implications for our view of ourselves and of our spiritual possibilities. We have entered an era when our very humanness, in genetic terms, is no longer a necessary condition of our existence. The fusion of human and machine intelligence is also a serious possibility. What will such changes in the conventional boundaries

between self and world mean for us? Do they have any relevance for a spirituality that is rooted in the recognition of the nonduality of consciousness?

It seems to me that the nature of consciousness will trump all these developments. Whatever experience awaits us—either with the help of technology or after death—experience itself is a matter of consciousness and its content. Discover that consciousness inherently transcends its contents, discover that it already enjoys the well-being that the self would otherwise seek, and you have transcended the logic of experience. No doubt experience will always have the potential to change us, but it appears these changes will still be a matter of what we can be conscious *of* in the next moment, not of what consciousness is in itself.²³

MYSTICISM is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes, and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science), or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).²⁴ Religion is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time. It is the denial—at once full of hope and full of fear—of the vastitude of human ignorance.

A kernel of truth lurks at the heart of religion, because spiritual experience, ethical behavior, and strong communities are essential for human happiness. And yet our religious traditions are intellectually defunct and politically ruinous. While spiritual experience is clearly a natural propensity of the human mind, we need not believe anything on insufficient evidence to actualize it. Clearly, it must be possible to bring reason, spirituality, and ethics together in our thinking about the world. This would be the beginning of a rational approach to our deepest personal concerns. It would also be the end of faith.