

I. QUESTION

The “question” wears different clothes:

What is consciousness? What is the meaning of life? Who am I, really? What is enlightenment? Is there “something more”? Is there a truer reality? What is energy? Do I choose anything at all? What is death? Is there some truer self?

The “answer” does too:

I am a human being. There is no predetermined meaning. The purpose of life is salvation. Nothing can really be known. We are everything. The world is an illusion. Death does not exist. Death is a beginning. There is nothing but matter. Everything is consciousness. ...

. . .

For me, the question was “what is consciousness?”

I was about eighteen when it became a matter of first importance.

I thought:

wait, I’m obviously not a thing in the same way the things around me are, so what am I, and what is all of this, actually?

It wasn’t new to me.

I grew up, among other things, on The Matrix and on my father’s occasional questions like:

“If no one is in the room, does the room exist?”

But only at some point, near the end of high school, did the search for “what consciousness is” become my reality rather than a theoretical problem.

And nobody around me seemed particularly bothered by it, which was interesting in itself.

So it doesn't bother you that you don't know what you "really are"?

. . .

I studied philosophy, mainly to understand "consciousness" or "the mind."

Then I studied cognitive science and, while writing my thesis, spent a year on Neander's theory of the perceptual content of a toad.

So what was I really looking for when I was looking for what "consciousness" is?

Not cognitive functions — the sort we mean when we say someone is conscious rather than asleep.

For a while I thought: maybe what they call the character of experience — what is experience, really? But that just became another version of "what is consciousness?"

Maybe something like "spirit," or, in philosophical language, a "substance" — something I thought I was, but had no better name for than "consciousness."

But what does "consciousness" mean here?

What is consciousness? — which in turn becomes: "what am I?"

So let's call it this: a "true understanding" of "consciousness" was, for me, the same thing as a "true understanding of myself," of "my reality," of "reality."

That is why, in the first sense, I am writing this book about "consciousness" — because that is the road I know.

. . .

What was I really looking for?

I could get a definition.

And another one.

And still say:

Hm, that's it!

I think...

"Yes, but what is it really?"

Actually,

what "it"?

The thing I'm looking for.

. . .

What is consciousness?

Stop.

It sounds like a question.

But what am I asking?

. . .

"Consciousness is experience."

We can say what "experience" means.

We can describe it.

We can study its structure, its conditions, its dependencies, what happens to it in sleep, under anesthesia, after brain damage.

But I can also say:

"No. Experience is just what I experience. I mean consciousness itself."

Right...

Meaning what?

“Well... whatever it is that makes experience possible at all.”

Okay.

What does that mean?

I can answer.

“A process taking place in the brain.”

And then we can study processes taking place in the brain.

But I can say:

“No. Brain processes only cause consciousness.”

Right...

So consciousness is something else again.

What?

. . .

After every answer, I can make the same move:

“Yes, but that’s not it.”

What?

“Consciousness.”

Meaning what?

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to find out.”

. . .

This does not mean that every question of

“what is consciousness?”

is empty.

If someone says:

“By consciousness I mean experience, and I am asking how it is possible” —

that is a question.

If someone asks which neural processes are associated with a particular experience —

that is also a question.

If someone asks why experience disappears under anesthesia —
same thing.

The problem does not arise because the word “consciousness” is somehow uniquely ambiguous.

What appears is this hypnotic move:

I get an answer,

and then the answer becomes just one more thing that is still not what I was really asking about.

Except I still do not know:

what was I really asking about?

. . .

What is death?

I can talk about the death of an organism.

About the cessation of functions.

About dying.

About loss.

About what happens to the body.

But I can also decide that there is “something” that is “death.”

Hm.

And now someone even seems to have shown up!

And now:

“What is death, really?”

What would count as an answer?

. . .

Recently I spent some time looking into what electric current actually is.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I had the idea that it was some kind of movement of electrons, and then I read that it had to do with the electromagnetic field.

So I started reading about fields, and then about energy.

But what is electric current, really?

What is energy, really?

If current is really energy.

And energy is really what?

Of course I can ask “really” in order to distinguish an accurate description from a mistaken one.

I thought one thing.

It turned out to be another.

Great.

But if I get an accurate description and ask:

“Okay, but what is it really?”

then I get another one and ask:

“Okay, but what is it really?”

and another:

“Fine, but really?”

then at some point it is worth asking:

what else am I looking for?

. . .

“Reality cannot be understood.”

“I want to be myself.”

“The world is heading for disaster.”

“I have so much to change.”

“But everything is love.”

“But everything is one.”

“Everyone for themselves.”

. . .

Or consciousness:

“I’m not a thing, I’m consciousness!”

And then there can appear:

“me, who does not understand what consciousness is,”

“me, who understands what consciousness is,”

and the road that “me, who does not understand consciousness” has to travel in order to become “me, who understands it.”

The question becomes a story.

And the story becomes a challenge to overcome, something that can look like a problem, a puzzle.

And the answer will be...

. . .

“The fundamental nature of reality.”

“A theory of everything.”

“Why is there something rather than nothing?”

“What is all of this for?”

And the point is not that questions like these are not worth asking.

Nor is the point that they cannot be answered.

I can answer:

“Everything exists because God created it.”

Fine.

That is an answer.

Now I can ask about God.

What is God?

Why does God exist?

Why did God create this particular world?

And once again, there can be something to search for.

But I can also receive every successive answer and say:

“Yes, but that’s still not what I mean.”

What do I mean?

“I mean why there is anything at all.”

And that is precisely when it becomes worth asking:

what am I looking for an answer to?