

Session 5.1 – What (and Where) Is Consciousness?

Metaphysics & Mystery Online Course

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Lauren Buckley: So the other thing I wanted to ask you about was various mysterious phenomena and your thoughts about them, but I think maybe for everybody's sake I should probably ask you; can you define metaphysics for us since we've been talking about this for so long?

Charles Eisenstein: I have not tried to define it. Maybe it would be a bad guess, just the word probably means an inquiry or knowledge information about physics, which would mean about the world, about rather than physics being a direct inquiry into the nature of the world this would be more of an inquiry into the nature of knowing how to know. I don't know; maybe that's called epistemology, I don't know. Yeah I mean to me it kind of connotes a level higher, a bird's eye view of things. We should probably look up in a philosophy dictionary what metaphysics actually means because I don't know. This is one of those words I toss off so I can sound educated.

L.B.: (Laughs) Yeah, we could have done that hours ago, but you know I think the feeling of what you think it means works for me. You mentioned that you don't usually use the word spirituality.

C.E.: Yeah.

L.B.: I wonder why that is and also what your idea of the word spirituality is to you that has many different meanings to different people.

C.E.: Yeah. I mean already talked about this as far as spirituality being about the things that science has excluded, probably because they're not easily measurable or perhaps not measurable at all, fundamentally. I hesitate to use the word spirituality because it implies a division of reality, of the universe into two parts, one of which is spiritual and the other isn't. Then of course the one that isn't gets devalued because the spiritual part is the higher part and it plays into a millennia old conceit that progress consists in removing yourself from materiality. The original iteration of that was the advent of social classes where the lowest class was the farmer whose hands and feet were in the dirt, and the highest class was the king or the priests, who, in many cases, whose feet were not allowed to touch the dirt. So this social hierarchy then was mirrored by a spiritual hierarchy or a spiritual elevation. I mean even our language still contains this prejudice that higher is better. High vibrations are better than low vibrations. Elevated is better than then debased. Superior is better than inferior. High is better than low. You could take it to man is better than woman. (Shrugs) I mean like... anyway, and so abstract is better than concrete and so one axis of progress is away from the material toward the spiritual, away from the measurable, away from the tangible toward the abstract. This prejudice also applies to science where the most prestigious of the sciences is the most abstract sciences. It's mathematics and theoretical physics where as applied physics, that's doesn't quite have the cachet, let alone engineering, let alone plumbing. So we have this spiritualized hierarchy or this translation of what was originally a social hierarchy into a spiritual hierarchy where spiritual good, material bad, and we all want to raise our vibration and raise our consciousness and consciousness, that's something that's non material so that's good and we're the conscious ones. So I don't like to play into that ordering of the world by using words like spiritual. Sometimes I use it anyway just because it's convenient and it communicates something, but I generally like to use it with a

disclaimer. That said maybe one of its useful connotations would be to refer to things that are normally excluded from reality, as in material reality, but that we are coming to understand are important. I think that the healing that we're converging onto is a reunion of the material and the spiritual. Like I said before, it's understanding that the qualities that we've separated off and called spiritual are actually material and that matter is itself spiritual or secret we could say.

L.B.: I don't know that this has a definition, but I'm curious to ask what New Age means to you.

C.E.: Nobody claims to be New Age. Nobody embraces the moniker. Oh yeah. I'm New Age. It's almost always used as a term of derision. It would be interesting to trace the history of the word, but I think that it comes from a valid intuition that things are changing in an unprecedented way, that we are entering a new age of humanity that is a more profound transition even than the Industrial Revolution or the Agricultural Revolution. I think that that is an accurate intuition. So to the extent that we, and people even who are avowedly not New Agey, we still kind of play into this idea you know, it's the information revolution, it's the digital age. Everybody knows that we are at a watershed moment. Maybe we're not, but I think we are so I don't know. I'm not going to bother to define New Age. You can use it in a lot of different ways, but there's something true in it, in the concept.

L.B.: We're going to start with some basic things here like what is consciousness? People throw that word around all the time.

C.E.: I don't know what consciousness is. I think it's an elemental thing that if you try to define it in terms of something else you lose something. That's what it might mean to be elemental. We could describe it. We can describe what it's like to be conscious or unconscious, but as far as what it is you'll have to ask somebody else.

L.B.: Can you describe then what consciousness is like or what increasing consciousness is like?

C.E.: Well I'm not sure if I can. Have I ever not been conscious? I can be conscious "of" something. When I'm asleep, I used to think that when I'm asleep I'm not conscious, but I think that I actually am conscious, but that I'm in a territory that is so foreign to my waking territory that I just can't remember it after I wake up. Except in the case of dreams, which is more like waking consciousness than the consciousness of deep sleep where we're totally somewhere else. I've since come to believe that I remain conscious in deep sleep and that I do bring things back from that state. Yeah, I mean this would be... hmm. If I think about it maybe I can say something. What is it like to be conscious? What was it like to be me before I was born? I don't remember. Yeah you know this whole thing, I mean we could talk about; OK so "what's consciousness? What's awareness? What's sentience?" You know, all these different words. What's New Age? What's metaphysics? I am not fond of starting a conversation by establishing definitions. It can be useful sometimes to explore "what do you really mean by that?" but the idea that if you have a solid basis of clear definitions and then you can reason your way up from those foundational concepts, I have my suspicions about that. I think that what seems like really clear irrefutable logic actually has its conclusions built into the definitions, that the definitions are colored by where you already are and where you want to go and it lends itself to tendentious reasoning, to start with definitions that seem objective, seem impartial, but actually take you to a certain place. They reflect a certain categorization of the world. It can be illuminating, as I said, to explore what exactly we mean

by certain things, but I don't take it to be the foundation of clear reasoning in imitation of the axiomatic method of mathematics. I think that that approach is limited.

L.B.: Yeah I think that's interesting. I mean I ask these questions because I have a feeling a lot of people have a different understanding of these words, but are using them around each other all the time. I'm just very curious what... I mean I'm not expecting you to have the universal definition of these words because of that, I'm curious to hear your thoughts.

C.E.: Yeah, I mean consciousness you know, it's "what am I conscious of?" When people say that they're conscious, like conscious business or something like that, a conscious enterprise, conscious marketing, as if there is this thing called consciousness that you can have less of or more of and if you have more of it than you apply it to these different things. I like to ask, "conscious of what?" and is it the case that any one person is more conscious than another person as an absolute predicate or is it that we are all conscious of different things, that we are all one consciousness that is looking at the world from different perspectives and therefore conscious of different things? I think that we are no more or less conscious than a rock, but a rock is conscious of very, very, very different things and having a very different experience than any of us are. So if it's something that is universal and in everybody maybe it doesn't serve to try to define, it's just an elemental facet of being and maybe, yeah for me it's more of what are you conscious of and how does consciousness evolve and expand or shrink depending on the relationships that you have to the objects of consciousness.

L.B.: Yeah. Even this idea that a rock can have consciousness, I know when I first learned that it's possible, that everything in the universe has consciousness or intelligence, even a photon, it was like such an exciting idea and it felt really exciting for like child me that had no problem looking at everything in the world as though it was alive and watched cartoons and had no problem with cars being alive and rocks having faces and everything talking to each other. There is like a truth.

E.C.: What happens is that we tend to project human consciousness onto other things. So like the cartoon *Cars*, the movie *Cars*, they're anthropomorphized and made into car versions of human beings. That is an error and I think a dangerous error because when we anthropomorphize the beings of nature and then we don't see them for what they are so we anthropomorphized them, but on the other hand we know that they're not that. It becomes almost this cover story to treat them as not conscious. It's almost an insult to project a beingness that something or someone doesn't have and say, "oh, I know what it's like to be you, you're just like me." In race discourse you never say that. You're not supposed to say, "well I know it's like to be you. I've suffered too." That's not to say that we are forever impenetrable to each other, but you want to know what it's like to be somebody, that requires intimacy, that requires listening to their stories, that requires the exercise of standing in their shoes. What is it like to be you? The same is true maybe even more so with non-human beings. So lacking the understanding that all things are alive, intelligent, conscious, et cetera, however you want to put it, lacking the skills of listening, lacking practice in the intimate relationships that allow us to understand the beingness of another being, then we maybe project onto them. "Oh you're just like us," and so the Western mind has a lot of trouble understanding what it really means to say that a rock or a tree is conscious because we apply human consciousness. We're not practiced in going to all of the different ways that consciousness can manifest. We're in a very, very limited sphere. So this might be a way, if you want, to expand your consciousness. I would say that the way to do it is through observation, listening, empathy. Following the question, "what is it like to be you? What is it

like to be you, tree, you rock, you sun? What is it like to be you?" It's a first step because to even ask that question sincerely you're already opening up to that there is a onus that it is like "to be" that is different from the I-ness that it is like to be. So it is almost a plea, it's an act of humility to really ask that question. It's a letting go, to refer to our earlier conversation; it's a letting go of what you know or what you think you know. That enables you to expand the boundaries of what it's like to be you because once you really take in what it's like to be another being and experience a taste of the consciousness of a rock or of a tree, it changes who you are already because fundamentally who we are is a function of relationship. This is one of the understandings I took from quantum mechanics actually, that to be is not to be alone. That existence only happens in relationship so you could extend that and say that therefore the more relationships you have the more you can be, the more existing you are, the wider and broader your consciousness is. So yeah, if everything is conscious, then consciousness grows through our expansion to include more and more of everything. Maybe if I wanted to define consciousness I would play with "consciousness is that which pays attention." It is the locus of attention. It is the host of attention. It is what exorcises attention, but I don't know. I would have to play with that. It's maybe something I could start with and you know, this is the kind of metaphysics I'm not that interested in really. It's kind of fun, but there's probably other people who would do that a lot better than I can. It's not my forte.

L.B.: One question that I have that we just touched on is about plants. If you sit at an ancient tree in silence and, like you said, listen to it or try to connect with it, some trippy things can happen. Then there's the part of me that's like wow, I have no idea in what way plants even communicate like it could be completely different. I don't know what my five senses can pick up. So I'm curious if you think we can communicate with plants.

E.C.: Yeah, I totally think we can communicate with plants. It's not a capacity that's well developed in our own culture, but other cultures developed it to a very high degree. The short answer is yes. I mean we do communicate in certain ways that might seem very mundane, you know, through observation. If you're a farmer for example or a gardener you can tell if the plants are sick or tell maybe what they need. That's maybe a kind of communication going on. They have an odor and you smell that odor and that affects you in some way, but it's hard. I think you're asking something more, asking about a meaningful two way communication. There are definitely people like what's his name, Eliot Cowan, who has this whole practice around plant spirit medicine and communicating with plants through various kinds of dream work and shamanic work. Indigenous people routinely saw themselves, experienced themselves as communicating with plants. That's where their herbal knowledge came from by their own account. I have to say that the alternative account of Western science is kind of ridiculous, that it's trial and error and that just by chance you discovered that... I mean just take ayahuasca as an example like the combination of these two plants. How did they know to combine those two plants? Do they try every possible combination of two plants until they got something that was psychotropic? If you ask native people, "how did you get your herbal knowledge?" they all say the plants told us. That doesn't necessarily mean that they got it in dreams or through what we call intuition. Even in the Western tradition there were observational principles that people believed were the plants telling us what they were for. The doctrine of signatures for example, the doctrine of similars was another one. Matthew Wood writes about this very amusingly. He says you know in medical school there's a class on the history of medicine and they mentioned the doctrine of signatures with the ridiculous example that those pre scientific people believed that walnuts are good for the brain because you open it up and it looks like a brain, so ha-ha-ha they thought in their blessed ignorance that walnuts are good for the brain. Well the irony is that

they actually are good for the brain, but of course that's because of the Omega 6 polyunsaturated acids. It's not because they look like a brain, but they are good for the brain. Matthew Wood, he's such a close observer of nature and derives a lot, it's not always so obvious. It's like okay teasel, it has the leaves catch water against the stem and that's a signature that this is for the kidney. So then he uses it for Lyme disease because Lyme is an attack on the essence, what in Chinese medicine would be called the essence level of the body, which is generated by the kidney in Chinese medicine. He follows trails of metaphor and signature to arrive at a medicine. This is an example of the kind of communication that can happen across these gulfs of difference between human consciousness and plant consciousness. It's mediated in mysterious ways that require dedication and attention and humility to learn. It's not like you just go into your New Age shamanic trance and you get off. I mean maybe that happens too, but maybe I'm just resistant to anything that doesn't take a lot of work, but I feel like that there is something to devoting yourself to a question. For me it's a matter of orienting to a field of information persistently over time. It's almost a courtship with that information. It's like learning a language, maybe would be another metaphor. So with time and with deep familiarity, then you learn the language of the plants and you have access to the consciousness of the plants. Maybe some people are really gifted at it and it comes a lot easier to them than to others. Yeah, so it's like that. It's not that they have a language like human language, but they do exercise mediated communication with each other for sure through aromatics and chemicals that go through the mycelium and through insect vectors and bacterial vectors. I mean they're communicating with each other in incredibly complex ways and a lot of that humans do not have the sensory organs to appreciate. We don't have mycelia you know, but with persistence I'm certain that we can communicate with plants and they can learn to communicate with us too. Some of them probably want to do that too, they're curious. They want to expand their consciousness also. Some people hooked them up to galvanic monitors that measure the electric potential between one leaf and another, or something like that, and translate that into a sound. I don't know exactly how these work, I think it's actually they measure impedance or something. So I don't know if it's like... I'm kind of making this up, but if it's like five milliohms and it's an A, if it's seven milliohms then it's a C sharp you know, something like that. They hook these plants up and according to some of the researchers the plants learn to play the instrument, learn to play the synthesizer and will greet different people with different songs, different sound transmissions. I mean I've heard all kinds of fascinating stories, so yeah; plants can expand their consciousness too. I don't know. This is something that fits into the larger story that I'm attracted to, but I don't have any proof for this. I can't say that I know this, but there's a lot we don't understand. They don't have a central nervous system, but that doesn't mean that they are not conscious. Maybe a central nervous system allows a certain kind of consciousness. It allows us to pay attention to certain things.

L.B.: Yeah. This is largely an exploration of things that we don't know so I'm very comfortable with that. I'm mostly curious about your understanding or your thoughts on these things.