Consciousness

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



What can ultimately be said about this life? What can we know for sure? Not very much. Science can tell us an enormous amount, but always by isolating, freezing, and modeling aspects of what is already happening. It

measures, compares, predicts. It is extraordinarily powerful. But it never steps outside experience itself. It works entirely within what shows up.

Whatever we investigate, we encounter it as appearance: as something given in perception, measurement, language, or thought. There is no place from which life can be observed as a whole, because every observation already belongs to it.

We can speculate endlessly about what might underlie experience. Is everything physical? Is everything mental? Are mind and matter expressions of something deeper? These questions are natural, even playful. But the moment we believe the answers, we have left inquiry and entered metaphysics.

> “Absolute certainty is a privilege of uneducated minds and fanatics. It is, for scientific folk, an unattainable ideal.”
>
> — Cassius Jackson Keyser

We never encounter “the world as such.” We encounter a world: structured by senses, instruments, concepts, histories, and expectations. That is not solipsism. It is simply the recognition that whatever appears, appears within conditions we cannot step outside.

Many non-dual traditions say that everything is an appearance in consciousness. Others speak of the world as a dream. A Zen story gently punctures this way of talking:

> “A student insisted that waking life was nothing but a dream. The master listened, then suddenly kicked him hard in the shin.
>
> ‘Ow! Why did you do that?’ cried the student.
>
> ‘How do you like that dream?’ replied the teacher.”

As Robert Saltzman comments:

> “In a sense, we are dreaming the world — because our perceptions depend on the nervous system doing the perceiving, the enculturation it has undergone, and the experiences it has had. At best, we see a world, not the world. When claims are made, you have religion — not knowing.”

— Robert Saltzman

The word “consciousness” itself is part of this difficulty. It sounds like a thing, a container, a subtle substance. But what we actually encounter is not “consciousness.” We encounter seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling. We know what it means to be aware of something. But we do not know what awareness is a property of. “Mind,”

“brain states,” “experience,” “consciousness” — these are names we give to the fact that something is happening at all.

If everything is called consciousness, the word stops distinguishing anything. It becomes a gesture rather than a description.

From this perspective, there is no “hard problem of consciousness” waiting to be solved somewhere else. There is only the inescapable fact that whatever we say, know, or investigate already appears. No explanation ever reaches behind that.

> “We are not only spectators. We are participators. In some strange sense, this is a participatory universe.”

— John Wheeler

Consciousness, then, is not a hidden object. It is the name we give to the impossibility of finding a place outside appearance from which appearance could be finally explained.

…how about some fries on the pier?