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Art and the Evolution of Consciousness

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The eye sees only what
the mind is prepared to
comprehend.

— **Henri Bergson**

The idea that consciousness, or experience, has evolved and may continue to evolve through time and history has been explored in one way or another by many philosophers and pioneers of the inner life, but is seen nowhere more clearly than in the history of art.² No one understood this better than the poet and cultural historian Jean Gebser, who contributed perhaps more than any other scholar to understanding the history of human consciousness.

Gebser's explorations of art and history beginning with a sudden recognition that art at the *fin de siècle* represented a new kind of consciousness, a new way of seeing and experiencing reality. With this in mind he searched backward through history to uncover a whole series of "structures of consciousness" that had emerged in order, starting with the earliest humans. Each structure

represented a major way of understanding the world; though magic, myth, rational thought, or in an integral way which I will have more to say about below.



The most ancient of these forms of experience was the *archaic* structure of consciousness, perhaps 200,000 years into our past. This structure, transitional from the animal, is now removed so far from our modern experience that it is difficult to get a clear impression of it. The archaic structure was followed by what appears to be the first completely human form of experience, a form that Gebser termed the *magical* structure. Beginning roughly 50,000 to 100,000 years ago it was characterized by an almost complete sense of space and time as present in each moment, and an identity with the group or tribe as contrasted with the later evolution of a sense of self as unique and individual. Indeed, the kind of personal identity we today take for granted would not appear until much later in history.

The earliest human art seems to come from this period. Perhaps its most impressive representatives are found the grand Paleolithic cave sanctuaries of southern Europe such as Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain.



These images exhibit a vigor and simplicity that has not been seen since. Their origins and purpose are largely a mystery, though there are many theories. Some believe the artists to have been women, some teens, some think the work was done by shamans. Perhaps the most authoritative is South African rock art expert David Lewis-Williams'³ suggestion that these frolicking animal figures represent an underworld of animal spirits, seen on the walls of caves like looking into a great aquarium tank to observe the undersea creatures that inhabit the realms beyond.

Moving forward in time to roughly the onset of the agricultural revolution, around 10,000 BCE, the next great structure of consciousness discovered by Gebser was the *mythic* form. In mythic consciousness the great questions concerning the meaning of life and death, the origin and fate of the world, and for each of us our place in it, are answered by grand overarching mythic narratives. The mythic world is ruled by grand gods and goddesses rather than the local spirits of the streams and forests that inhabit

the worlds of magical consciousness.

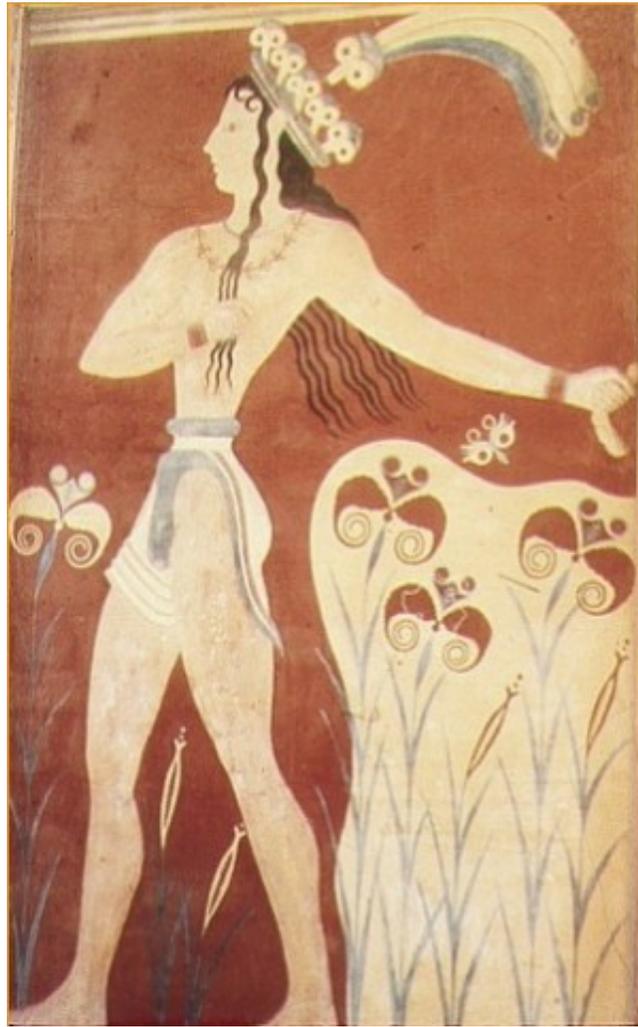
Now, according to Gebser, each great structure of consciousness remains with us as history moves forward, and so mythic consciousness continues even today as the root of the religious experience.

Gebser believed, and do I as well, that these earlier structures of experience were in no way

inferior to modern rational consciousness, and without them our modern lives today would become a kind of rational wasteland.

Today we celebrate the mythic consciousness more for the grand epics and stories it produced, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, than for its visual arts, though many of the great visual works of art of the *mental* structure to follow represent mythic themes as we will soon see. Among the images produced by the mythic structure, however, are the graceful figures found on the walls of the old Minoan palace at Knossos, perhaps the last major goddess centered civilization.

The mental structure of consciousness arose in significant part with the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, the first people in the Western world who attempted to answer



basic questions about life and the cosmos through reasoning and logic. With the exception of a regression back to mythic and magic forms of consciousness during the Middle Ages, we still live with the mental structure as our dominant mode of experience. When we need answers to how and why things happen, and how to confront or change them, we turn to reason, science, and economics, rather than divination, shamanism, and ritual, though these have not been left behind entirely.

Mental consciousness, the next major form of experience, came into full bloom during the Golden Age of Greece (roughly 500 to 300 BCE), which produced some of the finest art in the entire catalogue of human achievement. Though the great works of Greek sculpture at first appear to represent real people in various poses, in fact the proportions, for example, of the lengths of the arms, legs, and torso, were worked out with mathematical precision to correspond to the existing theories of the ideal dimensions of the body. They are brilliant but completely rational productions.



Discobolos (Discus Thrower), c. 450 BC.
Marble Roman copy original bronze sculpture by Myron

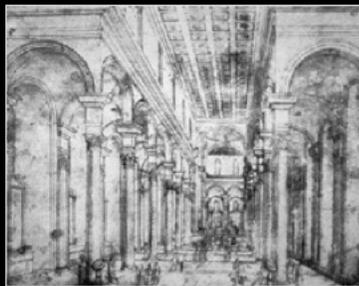
The Renaissance brought an entirely new dimension to the human perception, which played an important role in both the art and thought of that period. This was a keen sense of

perspective. It is not to say that the ancients had no awareness of visual depth or distance, but the fact is that the sense of standing at one point in relation to an object of art, say, a painting, and seeing its content in depth from that exact position, was an entirely new aspect of the human experience. It was an awakening to a new dimension of vision and of reality. And it was consciously celebrated in much Renaissance art.



Brunelleschi
Church of Santo Spirito

Drawing
and
photo



Horizontal Evolution

The idea of *horizontal evolution* of consciousness is suggested by the fact that over the course of human history there have arisen an increasing number of ways we human beings have come to experience the cosmos. In plain language, the number of points of view from which a modern person can see and understand the world is much greater than those available to our ancestors. As more perspectives have become possible the net sum of human experience has become richer. Let me explain by offering a simple but dramatic example.

Consider the somewhat startling fact that the distinction we commonly make between our “inner” perceptions of thoughts, memories, and feelings, and our experience of the “outer” external world, has not always been with us. Ancient philosophers and writers virtually never addressed to the presence of any kind of internal subjective actor as the owner of their thoughts, memories, and feelings.⁴ In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for instance, everything that we would today attribute to the inner life comes from the outside, often through the mouths of gods or goddesses.

Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, travels from the island kingdom of Ithaca to Sparta on mainland Greece to seek from dead Agamemnon’s brother, Menelaus, knowledge of the fate of his long absent father. During his visit he is awakened in the night by a sudden urgency to return to Ithaca, there to deal with the suitors who have gathered around his mother, Penelope. Now, the key point here is that he did not wake up at three in the morning with a worried sense that something was wrong at home, a sense powerful enough to drive him immediately to gather his men and set sail. Rather, he was awakened by the goddess Athena who warned him of trouble at home and who urged him to at once begin his trip home.

In fact, a completely realistic interpretation of how Telemachus came to leave Sparta in the middle of the night

might be that he awoke at three in the morning worrying about the uncertainties of his life. Of course his biggest worry was that the mob of suitors gathering about his mother would gang up and kill him so one of them could force Penelope to marry and declare him the new king of Ithaca. This is enough to make any sound young man gather his faithful friends and head for home as quickly as possible! But Telemachus did not distinguish between inner anguish and outer warnings of danger, so he responded to his sense of urgency by telling himself that Athena was ordering him to return home.

Ancient tales from around the world include exchanges between human beings and gods or goddesses. This, plus the absence of any record of inner dialogue, led psychologist Julian Jaynes in 1976 to publish his now famous book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*⁵, in which he argued that the voices heard by ancients were actually hallucinations of the right hemisphere of the brain. This idea holds little credibility today, but we are still left with the enigma of why intelligent men from Plato to Marcus Aurelius failed to identify an inner actor as the source of their thoughts. A notable exception coming near the end of the Roman Empire was St. Augustine of Hippo, whose inwardly centered *Confessions* seems amazingly familiar to the modern mind.

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West around end of the 5th century personal diaries and journals disappeared entirely and did not give any hint of the presence of inner subjective actors until the rise of the Italian Renaissance. Most notably in the 14th century journals of Petrarch⁶ we find a return of self-reflection that soon began to spread. It was not until the publication of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* in 1641, however, that the distinction between an inner world of thought and feeling and an outer world of physical objects and objective reality was systematically defined. For this reason Descartes is sometimes said to have "invented" the

modern notion of consciousness as an inner dimension of experience.

With Descartes we can say that the world of human experience had become divided into two realms, or two perspectives, an inner perspective and an outer perspective. This is an important instance of what I mean by the horizontal evolution of consciousness, one in which a bifurcation in perspective has created two worlds of experience out of one original world.

Let's look a bit more closely at exactly what this all means. Suppose we go for a walk in the forest and find ourselves confronted by a bear! Our immediate perception is that the bear is dangerous and frightening. That is, we experience the qualities of danger and threat to reside in the bear. In this way they are experienced outside ourselves as qualities of the bear. But wait a minute. Suddenly we notice that this animal is not a bear at all but a huge friendly Saint Bernard dog. We now feel silly and realize on reflection that our fear resided in yourselves all along and not in the animal. Freed of the fear of being attacked by a bear we are able to shift your perspective to our inner experience and see that the fear was you own all along. This is a shift many modern adults can make, but was probably not available to ancient people any more than it is available to children today, who would simply experience the animal, once a bear and now a dog, as no longer frightening.

A universe comes into
being when a space
is severed.

— **G. Spencer-Brown**⁷

Zones of Experience

Reflecting on all this we realize that to observe the inner movement of our own thoughts and feelings we must have

a place to stand, a perspective that lends us the necessary objectivity to see our own inner stream of experience. This perspective gives us what Wilber refers as “the look of the feel.” The development of what Gebser termed *perspectival consciousness* during the Renaissance, the perception of being in a particular location in space, made it possible for Descartes, in his *Meditations*, to adopt an “objective” stance, even in his own mind, from which to view the realities of his inner life.

Interestingly, the inner and outer dimensions of our own internal experience mirror a larger relationship between the inner subjectivity we all experience and the outer physical world in which we live. In fact, it is only from the view of inner experience that objective outer experience solidifies into the concrete objective world. This in mind, it is not surprising that materialism appeared full-blown only after Descartes created the division of the cosmos into an inside, or “consciousness,” and an outside, or matter; the latter as we have seen, made possible by the presence of perspectival consciousness. Descartes, and subsequently Newton, were absolute materialists where the physical world was concerned, and believed in a theory of atoms by which tiny solid particles interact and stick together because they are covered with little hooked bristles like nettles or Velcro.

Materialistic science became widely accepted among European intellectuals during the 17th century *Age of Reason*, at least in part because the physical world had acquired a new objectivity when placed beside Descartes’ recently discovered, and separated, inner reality. In surprising contrast, it was not for another 200 years that a dialectic between the inner and outer aspects of matter itself came onto the scene, allowing scientists began to look into the interior of matter itself. In 1925 while vacationing on the treeless island of Helgoland, where he enjoyed a thankful respite from a severe attack of hay fever, the brilliant young mathematician Werner Heisenberg worked out the matrix algebra that would become foundational to

the newly emerging field of quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics deals for the most part with subatomic realities, many aspects of which concern the *insides* of even the smallest particles heretofore known.

At this point in history conceptual interiors of objective exteriors were not yet well crystallized in human experience. Indeed, almost immediately the Danish physicist Niels Bohr developed an objective “Copenhagen Interpretation” of quantum mechanics which became widely accepted and, in a nutshell, stated that the strange events depicted in the mathematics of quantum mechanics should be taken only as predictive of concrete facts in the laboratory — meter readings and the like — and not as representing actual realities interior to matter. This interpretation was consistent with the prevalent philosophy of Logical Positivism, which claimed that all scientific statements must be understood strictly in terms of objective observations.

It was not until roughly the 1960s that physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers, began to revisit the question of quantum physics with the notion that its strange mathematics might actually depict something real. When this happened the top blew off the whole field and physicists and philosophers began to examine the deep mysteries it held. String Theory is one of the products of this examination, and has often criticized as offering no testable laboratory implications whatsoever. In other words, it is only about the inside of matter and has no outside parts at all, thus giving virtually no testable implications in the laboratory. It is the very nemesis of Logical Positivism.

Twentieth century physics has benefited greatly by increasingly flexible perspectives into the inner nature of matter. Many other fields have experienced similar transformations in the perspectives as well, examining the personal and inner dimensions of experience as well as its outer dimension. One way to understand these is in terms

of a form of horizontal evolution of consciousness. Here I explore this topic in terms of art.

Art and the discovery of perspectives

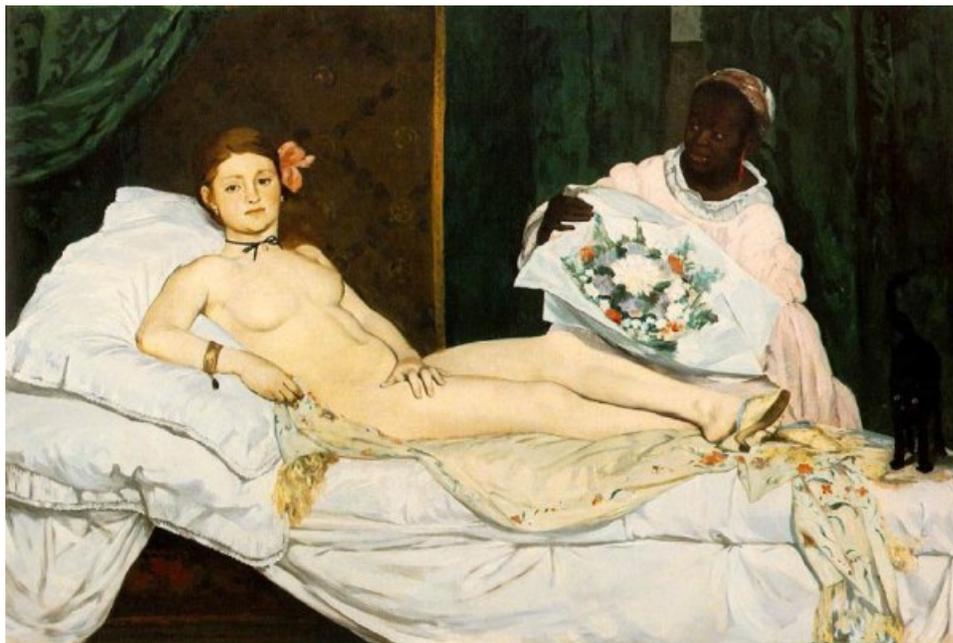
The history of art from the Renaissance until the turn of the 20th century is complex and variegated, but for the most part can be said to reflect classical ideals in one form or another; formal and restrained work exhibiting a high regard for traditional themes, often from classical Greece or Rome, as well as many Christian motifs.



Full-fledged realism did not appear in the arts, however, until well into the 19th century, almost concurrently with the discovery of the interior of matter. Speaking very roughly, it seems that the *fin de siècle* was a pivotal time in human history when inner and outer perspectives began to appear clearly in human experience and express themselves in many forms.

The objectification of the material world through artistic realism began in France as early as the mid 1800s, and during the following decades became a clear and visible

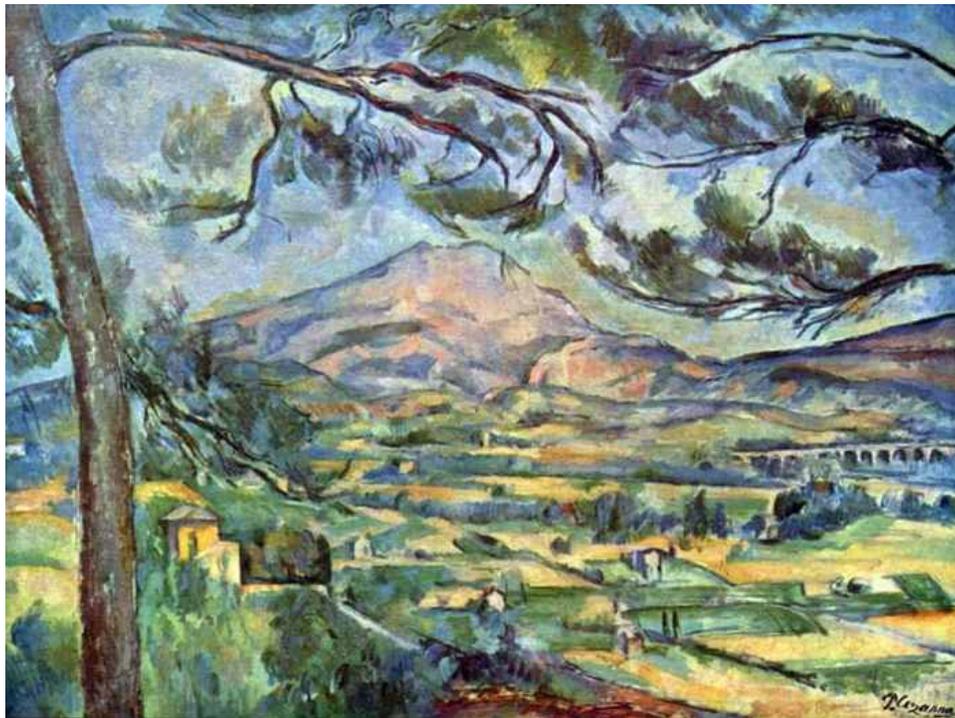
influence. Edward Manet's *Olympia* is a prominent and influential example, and can be contrasted with many reclining nudes that had been painted during the preceding centuries. One of the earliest of these was Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, a work done as a wedding present for a friend, and depicting the reclining nude as a classically idealized figure.



Manet's *Olympia*, however, is the painting of a naked women, probably a prostitute, displaying herself before the viewer with a look of melancholy or even contempt. A marked and intentional contrast to the dreamy Giorgione

nude.

It was during the year 1900 that Paul Cézanne, said to be “the first phenomenologist of art,” labored in quite a different direction to paint Mont Ste-Victoire exactly as it is experienced by the viewer. Thus he strove to reproduce on canvas the essence of the subjective experience of the artist looking at the mountain. Similar efforts, though less exacting, had been underway since the 1860s by French impressionists such as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Berthe Morisot, and Edgar Degas, and even earlier by the British artist, J. M. W. Turner.



By the 1920s *surrealism* became a significant movement in the visual arts, music, theater, and literature, expressing innermost conscious and even unconscious processes of thought and the mind. Perhaps best known among surrealist artists is Salvador Dali, while other notables included the Spanish painter Joan Miro and the German-French sculptor and poet Jean Arp. These artists were dealing with the deep interior of the human psyche, but framing their material in free-form artistic styles that indicate a significant level of subjective detachment

as well.



Surprisingly little attention was given to the inner dimension of shared or group experience. Certainly shared or collective consciousness is not new to human experience. The German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber had published his celebrated essay, *Ich und Du* (*I and Thou*) in 1923, examining the intersubjective depths experienced by persons sharing authentic relationships. Two French artists who celebrated intersubjectivity were Henri Matisse with his images of dancers, and Marc Chagall, who seemed caught up with a love for fantasy and romance.



All this in the balance, it seems that sometime around turn

of the 20th century the ability of artists to intentionally shift between perspectives increased dramatically. Realism, as seen in Manet's *Olympia* required a consciously fixed perception of an external objective world so as not to contaminate the work with elements of fantasy and imagination. Cézanne's painting of Mount Sainte-Victoire was an intentional effort to depict the mountain straight from the inner experience of the observer. Impressionism was seeking the same view, but in a less analytic style. Soon after these artists a variety of expressionist schools such as surrealism were digging into the depths of human psyche.

Pablo Picasso was remarkable for his fluent ability to represent multiple perspectives of the same physical object while working these into abstract aesthetic forms. His paintings, such as his 1937 *Guernica*⁸, can be said to be truly integral in their representation of multiple perspectives within a signal experiential frame. In this masterpiece we seem to step out of any limited point of observation to experience the terrible carnage of Guernica in multiple frames, as if superimposed over each other in time and space.



Certain contemporary artists such as Mark Tansey seem to have a gift for exploiting multiple frames of reference. His work, 1981 work, *The Innocent Eye Test*, for instance, depicts a cow viewing a painting of two other cows apparently relaxing by a tree, one standing and the other laying down while looking out of the painting at the “real” cow. Nearby several middle-aged men in black suits look

on, and someone in a lab coat is taking notes. This all appears to take place in an art gallery with one of Monet's paintings of a hay stack along the wall in the background. It is difficult to count the number of inner and outer perspectives hinted at in this work, but one thing for sure is that the artist intended for us to be aware of them.



Considering art created during the past two or three decades it is my own feeling that there is an increasing tendency for at least certain works of visual art, theater, literature, and music to invite us into an artistic moment in which we become aware of actually being conscious in the art experience. Perhaps this is the meaning of Tansey's *The Innocent Eye Test*. For my part, minimalist works such as Mark Rothko's nearly empty canvases seem to invite us to be aware of ourselves in the act of standing before them. Giving these works titles such as #20 discourages the viewer from trying to read them as representational or even abstract objects, and encourages us to simply experience the moment in their presence. Likewise, the productions of the German performance artist and shaman Joseph Beuys seem to invite us into self-reflection rather than toward interpretations of his creations. For his 1974 performance piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, he arrived at the John F. Kennedy Airport wrapped in felt and was carried by ambulance to an art museum where he spent a week in a large cage with a live coyote. This

performance had something to do with his love for animals, but no attempt to put a simple or even complex interpretation on it seems successful. Basically, the event, which you can now see as a streaming video, seems to invite us into an altered sense of ourselves in relationship to the coyote and the artist hidden in his felt blanket.



The thread of conscious experience as an intentional aspect of art can be traced in numerous contemporary art shows, books, and performance works dedicated to just this topic. What is remarkable about all this is the fluid perspective explicit or implicit in many forms of modern art. From the contemplative sounds of Pauline Oliveros' *Deep Listening*; to art exhibits such as the University of Kentucky Art Museum's glass and pottery show, *Opening the Gates of Consciousness*; to San Francisco's 1999 CCAC Institute exhibit, *Searchlight: Consciousness at the Millennium* actively exploring "conscious art" that encourages the viewer to be aware of his or her own experience in the presence of these works, one cannot help but be impressed at the ease with which contemporary artists such as Tansey play with experiential perspectives

the way Picasso played with spatial ones. Consistent with this line of thinking the contemporary Danish artist Olafur Eliasson describes the his art's ultimate goal as creating a state of self-awareness and reflection which encourages us to you to “See yourself seeing yourself.”



It would seem that the turn of the 21st century, like the turn of the 20th century before it, has brought fundamental shifts in the way we see and understand the world. In these shifts we see the appearance of a new integral form of consciousness, a horizontal articulation and integration of perspectives unimagined even a few decades ago. In this way emerging 21st century consciousness embraces a nimbleness that allows it access to aspects of the cosmos unimagined by our ancestors.

About the Author

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of Consciousness Studies and Director of *The Center for Consciousness Studies* at the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is also the President of the *Society for Consciousness Studies* and Director of Consciousness Studies master's degree program at the *Graduate Institute of Connecticut*. His background is in consciousness studies, neuropsychology, and systems sciences. Combs is Professor Emeritus at the University of North Carolina-Asheville. He is author of over 200 articles, chapters, and books on consciousness and the brain, including *The Radiance of Being (2nd Ed): Understanding the Grand Integral Vision; Living the Integral Life*, winner of the best-book award of the Scientific and Medical Network of the UK, with a foreword by Ken Wilber, etc.

Professor Combs is a co-founder of *The Society for Chaos Theory in Psychology and the Life Sciences*, a member of *The General Evolution Research Group*, and the one-hundred member *Club of Budapest*. He is Co-Editor of the *Journal of Conscious Evolution*, and Associate Editor of *Dynamical Psychology*.

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Примечания

1. Portions of this article follow: Combs, A. (2009). *Consciousness Explained Better: Towards an Integral Understanding of the Multifaceted Nature of Consciousness*. St Paul, MN: Paragon House. ↩
2. I have described this history in more detail in my books *Consciousness Explained Better: Towards an Integral Understanding of the Multifaceted Nature of Consciousness* (2002); and *The Radiance of Being: Understanding the Grand Integral Vision; Living the Integral Life* (2009); St Paul, MN: Paragon House. ↩
3. Lewis-Williams, D. (2002). *The Mind in The Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*. London: Thames & Hudson. ↩
4. With some notable exceptions this is true for the East as well as the West. ↩
5. Jaynes, J. (1976). *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. ↩
6. Said to have been the father of humanism. ↩
7. G. Spencer-Brown. (1979). *Laws of Form*. New York: E. P. Dutton; p. xxix. ↩
8. *Guernica*, finished in 1937, is considered by many to be the greatest antiwar artwork of all time. The painting represents the recent bombing of the Spanish town of Guernica by the Nazi air force. It was the startling first time in modern history that a town of civilians was brutally and utterly destroyed in war, and for most of the world it was completely unexpected. ↩

