

Editorial

Levels and Organization of Consciousness (Reorientation, Hypotheses Related to Psychiatry)

Consciousness, as a concept and as a phenomenon is getting more and more to be *denied, negated and neglected* by the majority of psychiatrists and psychologists.

This **denial**, as shown by Ey (1978) is fulfilled through different reductionistic approaches by:

- 1- considering consciousness as purely subjective experience.
- 2- reducing consciousness to a simple property or function called wakefulness.

It is rather **negated** by :

1- being inflated to such degree that it becomes lost in the generality of the supremacy of physical life by being assimilated exclusively in the higher level (reflective and creative thought) whether one defines it by the self or personality or confuses it with praxis and ethic (Moral consciousness).

2- ~~dissolving~~ it in a network of existential relationship (Hiedger) or impersonal structure (structuralism) .

In a previous insight (Rakhawy 1980) the author considered consciousness as the *vital matrix of mental life where other circumscribed discrete psychological functions could find its place and activity* . This seems to me, by now, as splitting the complex vital organization into a figure and ground. As this concept is put into test in my clinical practice it has also proven to be a sort of oversimplification.

Consciousness is to be considered as part and parcel of any included phenomenon. As transitory step, I come to define consciousness for now as: *consciousness is the structuring of a given organization into its specific wholeness at a fixed moment*. If this lasts for sometime and becomes able to be ready to reorganize itself nearly in the same pattern every now and again then consciousness acquires some relative delineated ~~entity~~ that worth a relatively stable term like level or organization .

This reorientation approaches parallel trials to delineate consciousness in terms of relations and organizations. For instance Ey (1978) describes consciousness as: *the organization of the system of vital relations which binds the subject to others and the world* .

It is not right to state that one has (or does not have) such quality of being conscious. One is but a conscious whole at a certain level through a particular experience. Ey, again, has put it as such: *".. to be conscious is to live the uniqueness of one's experience while transforming it into the universality of one's knowledge "*.

Thus consciousness is both a *process* and a *holistic organization* at the same time. It is also an experiential, relating and cognitive mode of being in the world in a particular quality towards some definite goal (not necessarily well delineated or known). As such we can speak about *levels* of consciousness .

Levels of consciousness:

The term *level* here is to refer to both a temporal as well as a mode of organizing at a certain "how of existence" (experience). During evolution (and then development) this has been established at different stages of evolution to serve certain life demands at a particular epoch. The arrangement of such organizations is not the least simple. A single experience could be represented and arranged at various levels in different dimensions simultaneously. Also existing organizations (consciousnesses) do interact, alternate and intermingle according to the pre-existing structure as well as the determining activating variables. At this stage one can say that consciousness is some *ready to unfold whole organization* as well as it is *the actual mode of existing and relating* in almost every experience.

For the sake of description, one has to introduce various dimensions independently.

1- The structural hierarchical level .

The nervous system as a whole and the central nervous system in particular is arranged in definite well organized hierarchy that corresponds to the evolution, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. This has been very much emphasized by Hugling Jackson. Such organizational discipline is not simply a closed mode of arranging the individual's: "Consciousness exists between the life of the organism and that system of reality which man must construct in order to adapt himself to reality."

The mode of unfolding such structural organization is not simply repetition of an already made organization neither it is temporarily influenced by the interaction with external factors. It is a process of continuous modification and reorganization according to the transactions and dialect of active variables. To quote Ey again here: " the genesis of consciousness follows the dialect of experience ".

For the sake of description we have to accept some sort of approximation to understand how organizations (levels of consciousness) are hierarchically arranged. The goal of this section is not the least to define different levels along the hierarchy. It is enough to show that there are old ,older and oldest levels of organizations as well as recent ones on various depths. The so called ego states (Eric Bern, 1975), schizoid, paranoid,depressive positions (object relation theorists e.g. Guntrip 1968) or solitary, aggressive and ambivalent brains (Rakhawy, 1979) correspond to this or that level of consciousness hierarchically organized .

2- Parallel levels of consciousness

Adopting the idea of the axial organization of thought chains as a central idea parallelized with nearer goal-ideas of shorter destiny could be translated in terms of consciousness. At a fixed moment some central (goal) idea exists to achieve a particular meaningful goal. Simultaneously there are some parallel goal-ideas as well that go along with the main central ideas whether to be included ultimately into it or to be ready to replace it. This depends on the degree and extent of alienated activity going on at the moment. At a particular moment any information could be processed simultaneously at different parallel axial level of the system ready to process. Under optimum conditions these levels are interconnected and led by the main central idea in a particular moment to a particular goal (not necessarily within the reach of aware-

ness). If this is not the case we can expect a normal or abnormal alienation to set in.

Reduplication of this second way of organization with the first we can assume that each hierarchical level of organization has its parallel disciplines at the same time .

3- Concentric level

If we come to see now the extent of conscious organizations we can find that it is also arranged in concentric manner. This could start from any limited central focus to extend out to beyond whatever we can reach even through imagination. To take one dimension we can start by body sensation level of consciousness extending to the so called self, society (through and through all its circles: family, work, country, world, race, the cosmos and beyond. Usually the inner (more central) has the potentialities, landmarks and is representing the outer and the outer includes the inner some way or another (under optimum harmonious conditions).

Interaction between levels of consciousness:

Again, for the sake of description we are going to present any one level of consciousness *as if* it could be independent and working in one direction at a time. This is, of course, neither practically possible nor logical. The inter-relation and interactions between such levels are too complex to describe. We can only refer to some possible hypothesis as they emerge, phenomenologically in clinical practice as valid hypotheses.

Level of consciousness, at any dimension, could interact with each other in many ways

1- **Alternation** : The most illustrating example is the alternation between the level of consciousness of sleep with that of wakefulness. Also alternation between REM sleep and NREM sleep. Alternation does not mean that one level completely replaces the other but that one level is definitely leading (dominating) at a time, then the other. This type of relation could be demonstrated in relation to any mode of organization (hierarchical . axial etc..). For instance, in Eric Bern terms(1975) alternation between ego states in appropriate situations is a healthy way of fulfilling the need of each ego-state in the proper time and proper setting. The pathological version of such relation is to be found in periodical illnesses in general .

2- **Confrontation** . This term needs special attention since it does not refer to a definite conflict, contradiction, competition or stable (stationary) compromise. It does not exclude any of these, but it refers mainly to the type of inter-relation between two (or more) levels where each one faces the other in a mobile dialogue (not dialect). This necessitates that the two confronting (relatively opposing) forces are strong enough to continue together, at least for some time, in this confrontation mode of relating. The pathological version of this relation is to be found in manic depressive illness depressive type and to a lesser extent mixed type.

3- **Compromise** .: This type of relation refers to some stable agreement between the two opposing forces. There is neither dialogue or dialect nor conflict or active confrontation. Opposing forces (consciousness/es) have come to some agreement

that seems to satisfy both of them, at least in part. This occurs on the expense of the natural movement towards growth. Closed circular conflicts and completely stable repetitive scripts are types of this compromise relation. Two forms of compromise relation worth mentioning: exclusion and inclusion types.

a) In *exclusion* one level almost permanently dominates the other (s). This stability is what has made us consider this mode of relation as some sort of compromise. The excluded level is not inert or actually submissive. Perhaps it is passively participating in such exclusion. In other words exclusion occurs only on behavioral rather than structural level.

b) *Inclusion* is another form of compromise where one level seems to include the other and thus fulfills its requirements instead. This is also a relatively stable relation.

This type of relations is to be found pathologically in what is called personality disorder.

4-Break through : One level of consciousness *emerges* through the other. It does not supplement or exclude the other. It is not conflicting with, neither confronting the other. Although it goes along with the other it neither agrees to a compromise nor confronts into a real dialogue. Ultimately it is far from going through a synthetic relation with the other although it is to be considered as the first step in such process(the process of dialectic integration).

Although it does not occur except partly, the REM emerging through the NREM sleep is traditionally called *emerging consciousness* . It is both emerging and alternating. Another example is the emerging consciousness during prolonged running therapy particularly in a group. This is usually recorded where qualitative changes of perception is noticed. It also happens during certain early moments of illumination in the creative process whether it ends in creation or not.

At a pathological level we can notice this type of relation in early psychoses with qualitative perceptual changes particularly in the form of depersonalization and derealization (such as the so called incipient schizophrenia, some manic and depressive illness depressive type and some subacute paranoid states ...etc.).

5- Synthesis: The ultimate of any of the above mentioned relation, *under optimum conditions for growth*, is to have some chance sometimes to relate with each other in a synthetic way. In other words all other relations are some temporary stayings until favourable conditions permit this dialectic growth relation (synthesis). In this relation, levels tend to oppose, contradict each other in an active complementary penetrating way at a time. It starts by dislodgement of any *compromise* relation. *Alternation* becomes less complete. It passes some more steps beyond *breaking through* and *confrontation*.. The outcome is usually construction of some new level of consciousness (higher unit of organization) as if it is some sort of qualitative rebirth experience. If this is properly established, it is hardly reversible. It may correspond to what Ey calls "autostructuring of the self".

Practical application of such reorientation in psychiatric practice:

Psychiatric practice includes both ways of interaction and inter-relation of levels of consciousness. Too much emphasis on control and adaptation through the use of long term overtranquilization or suppressive therapies could be act as some sort of static contamination of levels of consciousness. This is not contraindicated or hazardous all the time. It could be considered as an essential step in a long term therapeutic plan. It could also be indicated whenever freeing growth march is impossible or dangerous.

On the other hand in many growth oriented activities the tendency to achieve coherence through intricate complex teleological organization is a declared or more commonly an implicit activity. Higher units of organization are but higher levels of consciousness resulting from proper dialectic synthesis through genuine growth. This could not be achieved unless some sort of orientation is working phenomenologically along the basic integrating processes in health and disease.

In intensive psychiatric therapies (such as some marathon encounter groups, sleep deprivation therapy, prolonged running therapy) the available dislodgement of various levels of consciousness tends to facilitate proper alternation and ultimately integration between such levels into higher units of consciousness. This is the basis of radical qualitative changes of personality which is the only guarantee against relapse and deterioration. Most profound therapeutic activities are trials to go along with the natural biorhythm and the corresponding therapeutic activation/tranquilization rhythm (Rakhawy 1986) to achieve such goal.

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