

What is consciousness and how can we learn to balance our internal and external worlds? My painting explores my personal interpretation of consciousness and my emotions associated meditation. Consciousness has been an enigma to scientists, philosophers, and the average person alike for thousands of years. Some believe consciousness to be collection of past and current experiences; some believe it is the channeling of a higher power; some believe consciousness is simply an illusion; some believe it is just another organ in the body. Whichever way you look at it, consciousness is a mystery. Due to its ambiguous and subjective nature, creating a universal image of consciousness is nearly impossible. Translating my own headspace into a painting provides a far more realistic method of portraying consciousness.

Considering that the human mind has no known tangible form, I decided that consciousness would be best expressed through abstraction. This painting focuses on my experiences with higher states of consciousness and meditation. In a meditative state, there is a strong sense of harmony but also movement and change. Color, balance, and form play a critical role in creating an accurate depiction of the emotions tied with meditation. I separated my painting into the physical and metaphysical aspects of consciousness. Using pinks, browns, and tans, I created a form representative of the bodily aspect of consciousness in contrast to the light blues and purples in the upper half of the painting. The upper portion of the work depicts the ambiguity of consciousness. I blurred the lines between foreground and background while maintaining structure and movement. In balancing shapes, colors, weight, and tone, I constructed an image which exhibits my internal, subjective state of consciousness.

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Consciousness

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What is consciousness to us and how can we learn balance our internal and external worlds? This paper will explore our evolution from single cell organisms to complex consciousness and the possible explanations for what it may mean to be conscious. Discussing modern and ancient interpretations of the world, I will examine the ways consciousness has manifested itself over the past several thousand years. The paper will conclude with a more metaphysical look at our minds and offer methods we can use to better connect with ourselves and the world.

What does it mean to be conscious? This question has eluded scientists and philosophers alike since we became conscious thousands of years ago. Not only do we struggle with the question of what consciousness is but we have yet to discover how our current and complex consciousness came to be. How did we go from hunter gatherers to having culture, language, a sense of identity and building intricate civilizations in a shockingly short period of time. We still don't know and we may not for a very long time. In the meantime we can learn from the science, culture and philosophies that humans have been compiling for millennium. By analyzing our own minds through different perspectives we can piece together a far better understanding of ourselves than we can through only our modern western views. The better we are able to connect to our internal worlds, the more connected we are able to feel towards our external worlds. Coming to terms with ourselves is an intrinsic component of being content and compassionate in life. Although currently we cannot truly know what it means to be conscious we can learn to cope with our endless stream of emotions and thoughts. Looking into our own minds is the closest we can get to gaining a deep understanding of the world and how we fit in.

For three billion years the only life on earth was microscopic single cell organisms. "During this time, the microbes prospered, gradually altering their surroundings. The conditions they created made the environment hospitable for the emergence of more complex life-forms, beginning about 1.2 billion years ago" (American Museum of Natural History, Mickens). These organisms began to evolve at a rapid rate in the short period of ten million years. This sudden spurt of growth and evolution is named the "Cambrian Explosion." The "Cambrian Explosion" gave way to every living creature that has ever existed on earth, including humans.

If we fast forward to about five hundred thousand years ago we get to one of the most interesting places in the history of evolution, the beginnings of complex consciousness. In this period the human brain began to grow at an extremely rapid rate, for reasons we are still unsure about. Before this era every animal existed in fight or flight perpetually, but following this leap in brain size homosapiens began interacting with the world in entirely new ways. Melissa Hogenboom from BBC theorizes "...that diet – not social group size – was the key factor linked to brain size." Hogenboom believes that since fruit eating primates typically have larger brains that diet had an important role for brain growth in homosapiens. Notably, Robin Dunbar of the University of Oxford states that "...it is not overall brain size that is the important factor. Instead, it is the size of a particular part of the brain called the neocortex, which plays an important role in cognition, spatial reasoning and language." Dunbar argues that although diet

may have played an important role in the development of complex consciousness, social group size is key in developing the neocortex and therefore the leading cause of brain growth.

Another popular theory regarding brain growth deals with the dramatic change in climate that occurred around the same period of time that complex consciousness began to develop. Scientists consider the possibility that the expansion of consciousness may have occurred to adapt to a changing climate. Climate, diet, and social group are the most widely accepted causes for consciousness expansion but other theories have yet to be disproved. Paul Stamets, a leading expert on psilocybin, brings a new, more radical, explanation for brain growth in homosapiens. Stamets recently proposed the idea that the sudden boom in consciousness could be due to the consumption of psilocybin mushrooms. Since psilocybin allows unconstrained cognition by weakening the connector hubs in the brain, Stamets proposes that homosapiens gained expanded consciousness through more intense emotion, cognition, and vision. Although this theory is farfetched it cannot be truly discarded until we know the true cause of this massive leap in cognition. Considering that we still don't know exactly what consciousness is, it remains difficult to find what may have birthed it.

In order to develop a better understanding of how our conscious minds formed we first need an in depth understanding of what consciousness is. Some believe consciousness is collection of past and current experiences, some believe it is the channeling of a higher power, some believe consciousness is simply an illusion; just another organ in the body. Whichever way you look at it, consciousness is a mystery. Christof Koch describes consciousness as "...everything you experience. It is the tune stuck in your head, the sweetness of chocolate mousse, the throbbing pain of a toothache, the fierce love for your child and the bitter knowledge that eventually all feelings will end." These experiences can be categorized as qualia. Qualia can be described your internal and subjective response to the external simulation. In this way our consciousness could be described as a collective of experiences interpreted subjectively. To Daniel Dennett of Tufts University the idea of qualia contradicts the seemingly random and meaningless universe. Dennett questions the existence of consciousness and proposes it may be an illusion created by no more than physical reactions within the body. On the opposite side of the spectrum is the spiritual view of consciousness. These interpretations of consciousness can range from the belief in a oneness or energy in nature to consciousness being an extension of god to a combination of spirituality and science. Wilder Penfield, a famous neuroscientist, spent most of his career evoking then analyzing emotions and mental states created while his subjects were not consciously cognating. His data gave strong evidence that many mental states are the effects of fundamental brain functions. Yet in the conclusion of Penfield's book, "Mystery of the Mind: A Critical Study of Consciousness and the Human Brain" he writes, "In ordinary conversation, the 'mind' and 'the spirit of man' are taken to be the same. I was brought up in a Christian family and I have always believed, since I first considered the matter ... that there is a grand design in which all conscious individuals play a role ... Since a final conclusion ... is not likely to come before the youngest reader of this book dies, it behooves each one of us to adopt for himself a personal assumption (belief, religion), and a way of life without waiting for a final

word from science on the nature of man's mind." Despite Penfield's years of work, which contradicted religion and spirituality, he was still unsure whether or not consciousness was more than simple brain functions. His uncertainty is no less potent in our day and age. The relationship between science and spirituality remains in a perpetual tug of war. Cracking consciousness could be the potential answer to many on life's most powerful questions. Until then it is up to us to decide for ourselves if we believe we are the hand of god or simply a result of physics.

We have more scientific knowledge about the world than ever before; but does this knowledge really help us understand ourselves and our relationship to our environment any better?

Since ancient times humans have been looking for answers to nature's mysteries. Folklore, legend and religion were born to explain the unexplainable. Now in our modern age, we have the answers to many of the questions that perplexed humans for thousands of years. We know what the stars are, why seasons change, and why drought or famine occurs. Our knowledge is an enormous advantage over our ancestors. In our western civilization we no longer have to worry about our day to day survival, we have the ability to live without every foraging for food or building a home. These advantages are not without repercussion; many of us have lost connection with the natural world. To many, nature is mundane, we believe we know everything about it and that it has nothing left to offer. We have lost respect for our home, as a result our environment is suffering. We don't see our dependance on nature in our day to day lives so our connection to it has weakened. Our society has a developed a complex in which we believe that we know all the answers. In reality we know only a fraction of the seemingly endless void of knowledge our universe has to offer. Consciousness is a perfect example of the unknown that has been written off as known by science or faith. It is widely accepted as the work of god or simply an anatomical function. Not only are these two polar opposites radical but both groups seem to be fixed on their beliefs. When you think about the current ambiguous nature of consciousness it feels irrational to tie yourself down to one belief or another. Yet more and more people turn to materialistic beliefs. As a result many people feel dull, purposeless and defeated. We have our lives laid out for us; school then work then retirement then death, and whoever makes the most money is the most successful. I don't think it's a coincidence that depression and anxiety rates have been increasing steadily for that past 30 years. There is a steady pressure to "move up" in the world. We sit there in our classroom or office and wonder, is this it for the rest of my life? When we are constantly being told who or what to be we become disconnected. Disconnected from the world you're living in and even worse you disconnected from yourself.

"If you want to become whole, let yourself be partial. If you want to become straight, let yourself be crooked. If you want to become full, let yourself be empty. If you want to be reborn, let yourself die. If you want to be given everything, give everything up." - Tao Te Ching

Just because we don't know what consciousness is doesn't mean we can't learn to adapt and change to the nature of our own minds. People have been meditating for thousands of years and through meditation have been able to access higher consciousness. These higher states of consciousness have allowed humans to understand the world on a far deeper level. Although

meditation may seem like something practiced by monks or hippies, it is an exercise that can help improve the mental wellbeing of almost anyone. Meditation not only increases happiness, creativity, energy, intuition, and emotional stability but has physical benefits such as lowered blood pressure along with heightened immune system and serotonin levels. Meditation can achieve much more than broad mental health and physical benefits; meditation can lead to profound personal discovery and growth.

In personal experience, meditation has served as an amazing tool in all aspects of life. Meditation has made me happier, less anxious, more creative, and given me a better understanding of the world. All of my most profound life experiences have taken place during or after deep meditative states. I have only been practicing meditation for about a year, but in that year I feel as though I've made more personal progress than I have previously throughout my entire life.

It probably seems strange that simply sitting still and focusing on your breath could have such an enormous impact on the human mind; but the act of taking a break from stimulation and calming your stream of thoughts is a very powerful one. In the past, I have begun meditations feeling overwhelmed or depressed and afterwards come out with new, lighter perspectives on my "problems". After meditating, my problems or dilemmas always feel much more insignificant which allows me to make decisions much more rationally without emotional barriers.

I first began meditating after having a profound experience while driving through Golden Gate Park. I remember looking at a patch of trees and having a moment where everything seemed to click. In that moment I felt a complete oneness with everything. This sense of oneness came from the realization that nothing we can do possibly do really matters in the grand scheme of things. Although this may seem dark, to me it meant complete freedom over my life. I felt tiny compared to universe but not insignificant. I had a deep sense that I was a part of the universe and therefore it was part of me. It is an indescribable connection. To this day I remember the exact moment of this experience vividly. Over a few days following the experience the feeling slowly diminished but never truly left. The experience fundamentally changed me as a person. It opened me up to new insights, new philosophies, new mindsets, and overall more positive attitude towards life. It is still a mystery to me why or how I had this moment; to me, it is a perfect example of how little we know about consciousness and what our minds are capable of.

Before my experience I was a strong atheist and discredited any kind of spiritual belief or religion. Now, I am much more open to the idea of spirituality. I still do not believe in a "God" but I understand how someone who had a similar experience to myself may come to the conclusion that "God" touched them. Personally I like to theorize that I was just in the right place at the right time having the right thoughts and somehow it all just clicked. Whether or not that's what happened I don't think I can ever be sure.

The more I learn about consciousness the more mysterious it becomes. Through research and personal experience I have done a great deal of thinking about what consciousness may be and yet it seems more convoluted than ever. Consciousness is an enigma but also a gift; as humans we are given the unique experience of being able to see deeper into the universe. We

feel, we have complex thought, we can understand our planet better than any other living creature on earth and although cracking consciousness is important, it is equally as important to appreciate its capabilities. Without our conscious minds we would be no more intelligent than a dog. The fact that an element that is vastly unknown has given us so much power is, to me, possibly the most intriguing aspect of consciousness.

Humans seem to be as lost as ever in this world despite all our technology and knowledge. Due to climate change and warfare, death may be closer than many of us thought. I feel that is our job as humans to get to know ourselves and discover what we can contribute to the world. We don't need to know how we became conscious or even what consciousness is to know ourselves and our own conscious minds. Just because no scientists have yet to uncover perhaps humanity's greatest mystery does not mean individuals cannot uncover their own personal truths. Every question can be answered by looking within.

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