

# Consciousness

My own fascination is with the subject of consciousness, and the really hard question of where it comes from and is it confined only to homo sapiens? Back in 1944, a year before I was born, the physicist Erwin Schrodinger published a series of lectures called “What is Life?” The initial lectures attracted an audience of about 400 and came with a warning – “that the subject matter would be difficult!” What he tried to do was answer a question – “How can events in space and time which take place within the spatial boundaries of a living organism be accounted for by the laws of physics and chemistry?” At the end of the book he subsequently published, he drew conclusions which were philosophical about determinism and free-will. I may never fully understand the concept of consciousness, but I can be aware that it is a concept which draws from many different disciplines – firstly neuroscience, but also philosophy, psychology, theology and literature, which are all products of the human imagination. I include Theology because one of Schrodinger’s conclusions was that I, and indeed everyone who is a conscious mind effectively control the atoms which make up our cells, according to the laws of nature. This was not a new idea – the “Upanishads” contain the Hindu idea of the Brahman, by which everyone’s consciousness is only a manifestation of the unitary consciousness which pervades the entire cosmos; from which comes the Hindu idea of God. I have concluded that all sentient life has a degree of consciousness, which led me a few years ago to re-assess my relationship to all forms of life on earth.

If you have read the last paragraph, you might now have a headache, or simply decided to move onto something else, but as well as consciousness, I think philosophy is central to two issues which will dominate our lives in the future. The first of these is Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) – not just the programming of machines to carry out repetitive tasks which we find boring, but the possibility of creating some form of consciousness in a machine. Not only might it learn from experience, but also

experience the same sort of feelings and the need to form attachments in the same way that we do. A fascinating novel which considers this possibility is “Klara and the Sun” by Kazuo Ishiguro – (He also wrote Remains of the Day). Klara is an AF (Artificial Friend, essentially an Avatar), powered by sunlight and imbued with an infallible memory. She learns by looking and comes to believe that she has feelings as she interacts with her owner, Josie. Her fate is to be used by her human owners for their own ends and then discarded. The story is about Klara interacting with the messy and often unfathomable mores of human behaviour. She ends up being kept in the broom cupboard and eventually joins lots of other AFs on the scrap heap. As in so many cases humans do not come out of the story well!

Throughout the centuries, philosophy has always addressed the problems that confront humanity, but we cannot solve problems unless people listen and try and understand. The most pressing problem that we must deal with (By “we” I mean everyone on planet earth) is Climate Change. We needed to start working on solutions decades ago, but in 2014 we missed a real opportunity. On the 20th of November 2014, UNESCO designated the day to be “World Philosophy Day”. UNESCO published “The UNESCO Philosophy Manual – A South South Perspective.” It was written by Scientific Committees drawn from Mexico, Jordan, Turkey, Cuba, South Africa, China and Brazil, and believe it or not, produced by Saudi Arabia! It included a plan to take the planet to 2030 – an agenda for sustainable development – “A new vision for people, prosperity, peace and the planet for 15 years.” It was introduced by the Director General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova (Bulgarian) with the words “Sustainability calls for new ways of thinking about ourselves and the planet. It requires new ways of acting, producing and behaving. Philosophy is essential.”

The manual's overwhelming theme was peace. Philosophy is a human construct, but not a solitary task. In a globalised world we need a philosophy on a global scale. Philosophy has to embrace a diversity of thinking. Above all Philosophy must

guide us into the future. We need to pose three rhetorical questions:

- Do we want peace?
- Do we want a planet fit for the generations who will follow us?
- Do we care for other life forms?

Our history as a species is dominated by the desire for power; it needs to be replaced with a desire for the truth – a desire to do what is right. Peace rarely comes solely from Political Negotiation or treaties. Sadly, in the case of the UK since I was a child, we have relied on Nuclear Weapons to deter others. Tragically all the agreements reached by treaty and negotiation on Climate Change have failed. In 2015, the year after the Philosophy Manual was published the Paris agreement on Climate Change was signed – it acknowledged 20 years of failure. Three years later, a conference in Poland (COP 24) tried to devise what was called a “rule-book” – it failed, and even during the pandemic levels of Carbon Dioxide have continued to rise.