

THE TRUE HUMAN BODY

AN INTERVIEW WITH JACOB NEEDLEMAN

Photographs by Gail Needleman

FOR NEARLY FOUR DECADES JACOB NEEDLEMAN HAS CONFRONTED

the central questions of our era in light of the vision that lies at the root of the world's great spiritual traditions. Needleman's work *clarifies*: it takes topics that exist in disparate threads throughout our culture—new religions, esoteric Christianity, the founding myths of America—and frames them in a manner both sensible and deeply questioning. Needleman calls forth the human meaning hidden in virtually every aspect of our modern lives.

PARABOLA recently sat down with him to discuss the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the body. Amid the current talk of “quantum fields” and “consciousness studies,” Needleman returns us to the heart of the matter: Should the mind and body be understood as two aspects of one thing, or as two distinct realities? And what does this mean for our sense of ourselves?

MITCH HOROWITZ

PARABOLA: A recent *NEW YORK TIMES* op-ed piece advanced the idea, by now at least forty years old but just becoming “common knowledge,” that consciousness is a secondary result of chemical processes in the brain. Despite recent scientific alternatives, this reductionist view of human life still is what is presented to us.

JACOB NEEDLEMAN: Yes, the current prevailing view is of the universe as inorganic, non-purposeful, non-meaningful,

and mechanical. Everything just happens, working by principles of what is called efficient causality. There's no sense that there is Mind at all in the universe—it's just matter, in the modern sense of the word. But if matter is non-purposeful, non-intelligent, and without intentionality, how could it be that something quali-

bucket of white paint and having it turn red. No matter how much you stir the paint, you aren't going to get red. So, if life has appeared out of non-life, which is what seems to be, life must have already been present in some sense of the term. But that's unacceptable in the modern conventional view, or in what you might



tatively different from matter arises out of matter?

In this view of the universe, that which is dead is considered the real and that which is living needs to be explained. How can something alive and purposeful emerge in a universe that is fundamentally dead? In the ancient world, by contrast, reality was understood to be fundamentally alive, while death was the problem to be explained.

In an ordinary sense, it's a puzzle how things can change qualitatively. To have a quality emerge from something that doesn't already contain it is like stirring a

call scientism. And scientism is not science. Scientism is an unwarranted extrapolation of scientific method, making the method into a worldview and an exclusivist canon of all-knowing. In its framework, life becomes a problem to be explained by reducing it to non-life or non-living functions.

Now, if life is a problem in a world that is non-living, how much more of a problem is mind? Mind comes out of life. And there is also the question of higher states of mind. On the one hand, there is a view of the universe that is totally leveled and reductionistic. On the other, a view of a

universe of levels, purpose, intelligence, mind, and meaning, all the way up to what is called God, in some traditions, or the Absolute, or Brahman, or the Void.

P: How would you define consciousness?

JN: I wouldn't. Nobody can, unless they

about not only altered states of consciousness but of higher states of consciousness, then there is even less possibility of a clear definition.

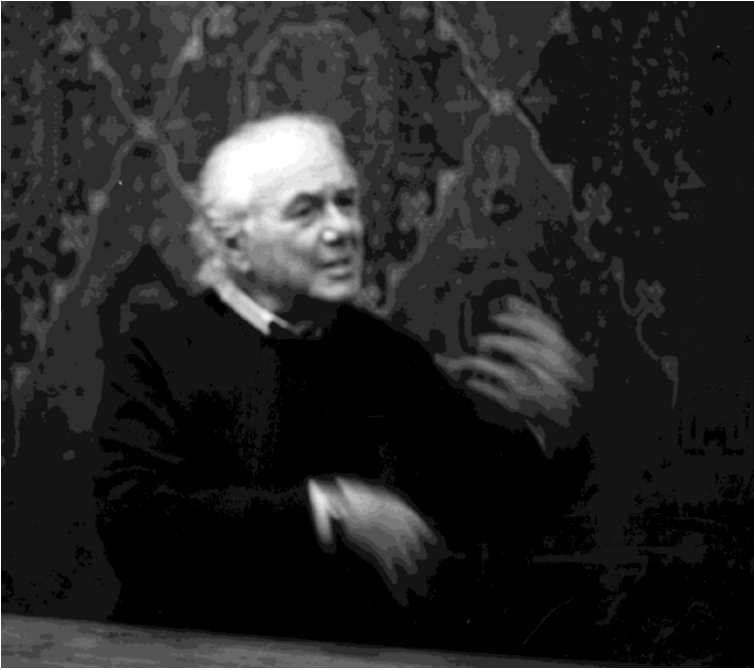
P: There's a popular literature in what we might call consciousness studies, which views consciousness as an independent phenomenon. Many of its theorists and writers seem determined to avoid language that sounds theistic or religious, so today we hear of quantum fields, whereas in the 19th century a term like Oversoul might have been used. By trying to conform to the customary language of science, is something lost?

JN: Let's take the Oversoul, using it in Emerson's sense. Of course he was reflecting a timeless idea of Hinduism, in a way Buddhism, in a way all of the great spiritual traditions of the world. The Oversoul is a deeply moral,

intentional intelligence penetrating all the interstices of reality, the whole universe. And it enters equally into human life when a human being actualizes the possibility of intentionally accessing that action of the Oversoul in his or her own individual self. So, the Oversoul is that in us which really perceives, acts, and wills, according to the good, the overall beneficence of the universe.

What is called the quantum field, however, is usually understood as a totally non-intentional, non-conscious field of forces. It is a region in which certain events are taking place involving material entities or electronic entities or nuclear subatomic entities. It's called a field

reduce it to something that is non-conscious. What we can say has been said by greater minds than ours: you know it when you have it. If I say that consciousness is awareness, that is simply explaining one unknown by another. Calling one thing you don't understand by another doesn't do anything. But we know, more or less, when we wake up from sleep that we are awake. We know what it means to be aware of something. But there's no definition. Look it up in the dictionary. You'll find just another synonym. So I think what people mean by consciousness is the ordinary experience that we're having now speaking to one another, looking at each other. When we begin speaking



because it's not a thing that you can point to but rather a region, maybe even a region of mathematics, in which events can and do happen. Now, could we make a bridge between that and the Oversoul? Does this region, does this field, care for human beings? Does the quantum field love? Does it allow you to will the good for your neighbor? It's quite a stretch to try to claim that. But if you say yes, if you say the quantum field does have those qualities, you've simply defined the quantum field as the Oversoul.

P: The scientific method usually seeks results that can be replicated, and the inner experience of consciousness is not repeatable on those terms.

JN: In a certain sense such experiences are repeatable. Let's take a great modern empirical thinker, David Hume, who shook the world by arguing that all we have in our so-called self are impressions of passing thoughts, emotions, sensations, and perceptions. When I look at the theater of my mind, I see only such impressions one after the other. I have no actual experience of an enduring self. Therefore, he concluded, the belief in the self as an entity subsisting throughout my life is unwarranted.

Hume looked into his mind. But how did he look into his mind? What does it mean to look into yourself? How do you do that? Does everybody understand what that means in the same way? If Hume had the luck to be near a Zen teacher, unlikely in Scotland at that time, the teacher might have said: "Very good work, David, but you've just begun. Let me show you how to go further. We've worked at this for hundreds and hundreds of years and I'm going to show you a way to do it that can produce even more interesting observa-

tions. Sit in this way, hold your hands like this, close your eyes, and follow what I say and just try to work."

In any case, there is a long history of an empiricism that looks into the mind—in Buddhism, in Hinduism, in Sufism, in Christian contemplative tradition, and in the Kabbala. To those who say deep inner experiences can't be scientifically repeated, one can reply that, well, perhaps they can't be induced in a laboratory—although more and more we can measure corresponding neurophysiological phenomena. However, over the centuries the

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great spiritual teachings of the world have shown that it is very possible for individuals to come repeatedly to such experiences under precise inner conditions.

The kind of knowledge that can be verified in the scientific sense does not depend on the state of mind of the investigator. He or she simply has to have a certain level of sanity, training, and education. But this inner knowledge, self-knowledge, involves a certain willingness to put one's whole mind, one's whole self, in question. It's a different movement of knowing. It's a movement in—not the same as with the other sort of knowledge, which is a movement out, that is, a knowledge organized by the logical mind and by mental concepts such as those offered by scientific theory. So in the spiritual traditions there is an interior empiricism, whereas science in general is based on external empiricism.

P: There are influential educators who tell their students and the media that the time

is near when we'll be able to create a computer with what they call consciousness.

JN: When you think of some of the metaphysical balloons and some of the dogma and some of the fairytales that are pernicious in religions, you begin to respect that scientific thinkers might want to free us from all that. I'm glad they've done that clean-up job. But it may be just another illusion to assume that in order to know something one must reduce it to elements that submit to scientific analysis.

When we begin to take seriously the idea of different states of consciousness, this changes everything. This is the most revolutionary idea of our time: a higher state of consciousness is not a mode, not an alternate state but a higher state. Our waking state is to our sleep as a higher

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state is to our waking state. Just as we can know things in our waking state that we can't know in our dreaming state, we can know things in a higher state that we can't know in our waking state.

There is what Charles Tart has called state-specific knowledge. We are infinitely more capable cognitively in our waking state than when we are asleep in bed. A higher state of consciousness also brings with it its own state-specific knowledge. We can know things in a higher state of consciousness that we cannot even imagine in our ordinary state—no matter how brilliant we are.

It's a revolutionary idea that the whole of our science is state-dependent. As soon as you have a sustained access to another

state of consciousness, you realize you have an instrument of knowing that is not otherwise available. It casts a new light on what science knows. Not that things are disproved, but that the data and discoveries of modern science can be organized differently and become evidence of a higher level of truth. But this can't be communicated to someone who has not only never experienced a higher state but who also refuses to believe *a priori* that such a state really exists.

P: Several years ago a colleague of mine said that in the spiritual search, or in the search for consciousness, the body is everything. Do you agree with that?

JN: What the body is for is the question. It would seem our mind has no relationship to the body. The body goes along digesting food, regulating instinctive functions, and doing things of unbelievable complexity. Our puny little mind is not directing any of that, obviously. We can tell the body what to do with a whip but there's a kind of violence in that. Most of the time the body is going its own way. The body is stronger in that sense.

In meditation you can see that the body really wants to obey something higher. But there's no real authority that the body can respect or even understand most of the time. We all discover in the West when beginning to try to meditate that the body resists. It fidgets, it wants to move, tries to tell us that something bad is going to happen if we don't move our leg, and so on. But if the meditator goes on trying to watch, trying to not react, and trying to keep the body quite still, the body relaxes a little bit. The body will relax a bit when you say "relax"; it just doesn't go very far and doesn't last very long.

In one sense, everything's in the body, but in another sense, no. There may be little or no relationship among the fundamental elements that live in the body. Take, for example, a marriage in which two people are fighting each other—they don't talk to each other, they sleep in different rooms. Yet, it's all within the marriage. So to say it's all in the body doesn't say much yet.

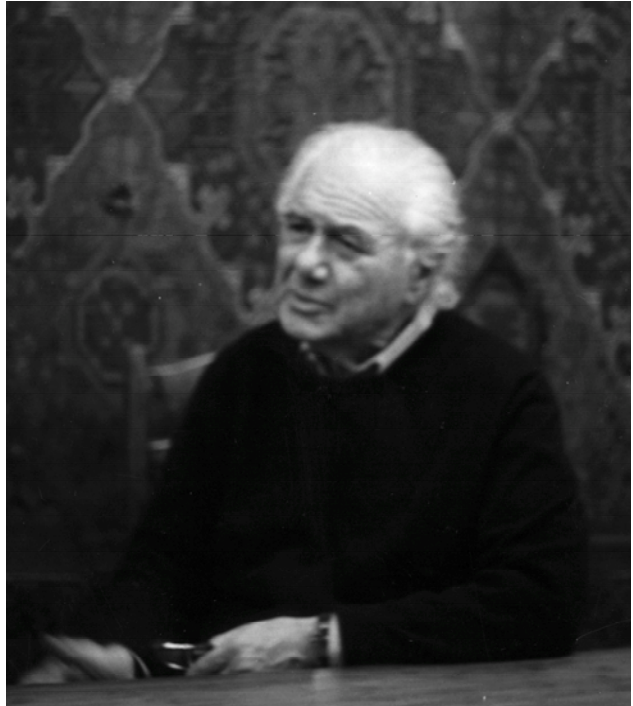
I'm trying to point to something experiential. Sooner or later, the body begins to feel respect for that within it which is gently saying to it, don't move, remain still. The body begins to like that. It begins to understand that there's something else within it that it never knew about. In the West, in our contemporary world—I'm not talking about other cultures—the body is accustomed to getting what it wants, or to rebelling inwardly and waiting for the time to get it in some other way, or resisting, or getting itself cut off.

If the body works in a spiritual discipline, sooner or later it begins to recognize another authority, and it wants to obey that authority: "At last, somebody I can obey. How I have wished for that!" It joyously begins to recognize a master. And that's the beginning of the idea that "everything is in the body." Because then the body itself is suffused by the mind in a way that it isn't usually. Not by thoughts, but by another quality of attention, which we haven't spoken about.

There are many images and symbols in the wisdom traditions that show us the human body irradiated by a finer energy, a vibrant sensation, a body full of light. That's the true human body, and every-

thing may very well be in that body. But that's not the body that's going out and smoking cigars and stuffing its face. In fact, our body is more like a place where evolution needs to proceed. It needs to be transformed.

P: What is the body for? If, as some teach-



ings suggest, the soul is already perfect, if it comes from a perfect reality and it's going to a perfect reality, what is incarnation for?

JN: The mind can ask questions that the mind alone cannot answer. There are certain questions that are answered only by a state of being, which then can be reflected in words. That's not an evasion, but we have to bear in mind that the only really good questions are those unanswerable questions, and they're the ones that require another state of being in order to really have the answer to them. Woe to us if we stop asking

them; but how to ask such questions? What is the body for? Perhaps you could say that it's to be an instrument in the search, to be part of our search.

There's something about the body that's absolutely essential to the development of man's possibilities, of why we are on earth. If we are on earth for a reason,



for a purpose, then the body must be there to serve that purpose. It's sort of a backward way of putting it, but there's an idea that God's love, God's creation, God's purpose, requires man—a being who is able intentionally to allow the purposes of the higher to go toward the world of matter and life. And of course if a human being can allow that, he can also not allow that. If we weren't able to block it we wouldn't be able to allow it.

Here we are faced with the age-old drama of human freedom. Man is free, which means there's a certain freedom that makes it possible to become what we are meant to be. To me, it has to do with

the freedom of the attention, which is perhaps the only really free element in human beings. Such as we are, the possibility of human freedom exists in the attention, and that can carry an influence down into our bodies and through our bodies into the life of the earth. We become instruments of God. And in the process we become truly human.

P: Is consciousness given, or is it something that we have to earn?

JN: It's both. Supposedly it's St. Augustine who said that God provides the wind but man must raise the sails. So consciousness is grace, in a way; it is given. Therefore you don't have to earn it, but the work consists in raising the sail, or preparing the body, if you like, preparing this being to receive the gift that is always being offered. And all the great mystics' teachings are telling us that it's there, it's waiting, it's calling, it's closer than your jugular vein, it's constantly knocking, saying let me in, let me in, and all you have to do is open the door. But that's no mean feat, to open the door. It's like Zen enlightenment—it's instantaneous, but it may take your whole life for instantaneous enlightenment, the complete freedom from the ego, to occur. So, it's work. The work is preparing to receive the gift, and that's a struggle.

P: As this discussion is occurring, everyone is following the case in Florida of a comatose woman and the battle over removing her feeding tube. Can consciousness still be present in such a person?

JN: [long silence] I really don't know that. I don't know.

My experience in ethics committees and ethical situations, however, is that when you visit the situation yourself, and use your eyes and ears and heart, and get to know everything you can, your intuitions awaken on the spot. Ninety-five percent of the time the dilemma answers itself. An ethical problem that is intractable in the abstract is not intractable in the concrete. You know. You see a patient, you see the family, and you see what's going on all around the situation. When you are there, once you meditate and reflect on it, it usually answers itself.

P: Is that why we can't define consciousness in the abstract? It can only be understood through direct experience when it is actively present in oneself?

JN: That's right. And what light does that throw on these apparently intractable ethical dilemmas? You need the development of an ethical intuition, which is called "conscience." And consciousness without conscience is an abstraction. Consciousness in its ultimate sense is a moral force, not just an intellectual or cognitive one. Reality is suffused with a value component. It's not "value-free." A lot of Western thought ignores Plato—for whom the highest reality is called the Good—and claims instead that fundamentally things either are or are not, and are value-free.

But the element of value is an objective fact. An idea that came into modern Western thought, and was highlighted in the scientific revolution—in Galileo and Kepler and modern philosophy—is that it is only "primary" qualities that are measurable and therefore real. Secondary qualities represent only the interaction between the observer and the observed, and tertiary qualities exist

only in the observer—in that sense they are not "real." In this view, the Mona Lisa is nothing but pigments on canvas, weighing sixty pounds, or whatever it is. That it is also an intriguing, mystical, beautiful image is not part of the painting, it's only my reaction to the painting. The Mona Lisa is just pigments on canvas—that's what it really is in this view—and it only becomes beautiful when someone reacts to it. But the view

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that I'm speaking of asserts that the Mona Lisa is intrinsically beautiful, and that this value is part of its objective reality.

We are surrounded by an assumption that "everything is relative," that Mozart and a Coca-Cola jingle are just music, the value of each depends only on taste: you happen to like Mozart, I happen to like Coca-Cola jingles. Who's to say? And I say, I'm to say. Listen to Mozart, learn what Mozart's doing. If I listen to an Indian raga and I've never heard it before, I don't know what the hell it is, it's boring. But when somebody can help me understand what's going on, then when I listen to this music, something actually takes place in me. So, it's the same with the universe. The universe is like the Mona Lisa. We hear, "It's just atoms and molecules, buddy." But, no, the universe, like Mona Lisa, requires the observer—and with the possibility that he brings, the possibility of attention and even of higher states at a certain level, only then can we begin to understand how large the truth really is. ||