

MY IMPRESSIONS FROM READING HUSTON SMITH'S

"Cleansing the Doors of Perception; The Religious Significance of Entheogenic Plants and Chemicals"

(Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, New York, 2000)

INTRODUCTION TO REVIEW

Back in the 1960s and 1970s I was aware of the use of drugs to induce visions and revelations among some of my contemporaries. Being a rather devoted Mormon at the time, I did not participate, I sought visions and revelations in a way compatible with my faith. But I wished my friends well, and was very much aware of the fact that there was bona fide research into the potential of LSD, in particular, to "open the doors of perception" as it were.

I was a reader of works by Stanislav Grof in this area of research, and he quite convinced me that the altered states of consciousness achieved by ecstatic mystics, through whatever techniques they employed, resembles the states reported under controlled experiments with hallucinogens. So imagine my surprise when, in the late 1970s, I was happily chatting with a psychologist friend and reporting on what I had read and he pronounced all of the above utter nonsense, totally wrong, untruths conjured up by drug-influenced maniacs, etc. So, I quickly dropped that subject with that person, but I knew he was wrong.

So that is why I bought the book and perused it. I was pleased to see he paid reverent attention (as opposed to the irreverent attention of my friend) to Grof's work. But this is not at all why I am reviewing this book here. I am reviewing here only what Smith, in this book, has to say about the nature of consciousness.

Chapter 5, "*The Sacred Unconscious*"

This central chapter of the book contains several pieces of information and observation that have bearing on my quest to come up to speed on the nature of consciousness. On pages 65 and 66, Smith poses four mysteries unexplained and perhaps ever unexplainable by science:

First, how the universe originated in the first place. . . .

Second, how, following the Big Bang, matter derived from non-matter. . . .

Third, how qualities derive from quantities. . . .

This is all very interesting, of course, but where my interest is really piqued is at the fourth mystery:

Finally, how thoughts and feelings – in short, mind – derive from brain.

Smith then promises to focus on this one. Good.

Smith, publishing in 2000, cites a statement from an expert named Thomas Nagel who was a participant in a 1992 symposium on Experimental and Theoretical Studies of Consciousness. That statement suggests it may not ever be possible to reduce the way

consciousness arises from matter to chemical and physical phenomena. The point being, of course, that how consciousness arises in the brain is a mystery and may always be.

Smith suggests that Steven Pinker, "a leading cognitive scientist" from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is a proponent of seeing consciousness as a mystery with a basis in chemistry and physics. Good, just so happen to have bought a book on this topic by Pinker. Will throw it into the review hopper.

So, Smith says it is a mystery from the physical sciences' points of view, but he has an alternative model based on his learning from serious devotees of India's religions. That alternative model, it turns out, is not a model at all to me. Not in the scientific sense anyway. But it is a worldview that works for many, and that I believe to be either a working hypothesis, or even a statement of faith, more than as a model. In fact it aligns closely with what I intuitively perceive to be correct, but it is unprovable speculation as my intellect will be happy to tell you at the same time.

Smith spends pages developing the layered consciousness model, with the self at one end and, through several successive layers, the Self (Brahman, which Smith instead calls the "Pure Light of the Void") at the other end. Here is Smith's model then, based on Eastern notions as contrasted with Western notions (pp. 71-72):

As the Pure Light of the Void works its way through these "boxes" – which in Sanskrit are called "sheaths," and which in many traditions are referred to as veils – it grows progressively dimmer and we are brought back to the fundamental difference between the traditional and modern models of the mind that I previously mentioned. Modernity sees the mind as having arisen from what is inferior to it, whereas traditional people see it as deriving from what is

greater than itself and carrying within itself traces of its noble ancestry.

Smith cites poets and scientists who, though Western, agree with this view or model. He then goes on to illustrate the model through describing a fully self-realized individual whose experience bears out this model.

Smith's book stopped being of interest to me, for this particular review's purpose, at this point.