

IN THIS SECTION:

Frederick Amrine gets to the heart of the question of the evolution of human consciousness in a way other professors will respect and everyone can follow.

Our gallery features Free Columbia, students and instructors of the school which is also featured in the initiatives section.

Then science and art “make nice” with each other for a few charmed days in Portland, Oregon.

Idea, Theory, Emotion, Desire

by Frederick Amrine

For Mary Emery¹

Rudolf Steiner’s account of “the evolution of consciousness” is surely one of the greatest feats of intellectual history. Fully understood and assimilated, it would effect a paradigm shift as fundamental and consequential for the humanities and the historical social sciences as the Theory of Relativity was for physics. In opposition to conventional intellectual history, in which a succession of subjective ideas are seen as inhabiting epistemological structures presumed to be constant, Steiner argued that the structure of human consciousness itself has evolved. He saw that changing structure as the main contributor to the succession of different paradigms or mentalities.

Like other great ideas, “the evolution of consciousness” is simple in itself, but vast in its consequences and complex in its realization. Steiner unfolds it over many hundreds of passages in many dozens of books and lecture cycles. Owen Barfield’s great service was to have understood Steiner’s account so thoroughly, and to have expounded it so elegantly in *Saving the Appearances* (1957).² Barfield would be the ideal guide through this new world, but *Saving the Appearances* is already maximally dense, resistant to summary. Instead I would like to convey the main concept of the evolution of consciousness via my own thought experiment in the spirit of Barfield.

Consider the etymologies of the four common English words in my title, two of which (“idea” and “theory”) refer to thinking, one to feeling (“emotion”), and one to will (“desire”). In tracing etymologies we go backward through time, into an earlier consciousness, which means that etymology provides insights into the history of consciousness itself. Barfield is the acknowledged master of this exercise, which he began already in his first monograph, *Poetic Diction*, and then pursued systematically in *History in English Words*.³

Idea: This is Plato’s term. In Greek, *idea* is grammatically the past participle of the verb “to see.” For Plato, an idea is an “I-have-seen.” Earlier the word had begun with a *digamma* (“w”), which makes immediately apparent its kinship with the Latin verb *video* (pronounced “wideo”), “I see”; hence Cicero rendered Plato’s term *species*, from the same root as the verb *specere*, “to see” (cf. *speculum*, “mirror”) [HEW 106]. All of this conforms perfectly to Plato’s metaphysics: recall for example *Phaedrus* 247, where Socrates locates the Ideas beyond the Zodiac, whence they are viewed by the gods and any philosopher able to join their sidereal procession.

Theory: Greek and Latin *theoria*, contemplative viewing of a spectacle; the root is the same as that of the word “theater.”

Emotion: The earliest occurrence in English (1603) describes the “divers Emotions” of the Turks, meaning their various migrations; another of the earliest listed by the *OED* (1695) refers to an earthquake as an “accidental emotion” of the center of gravity of the Earth. Before the seventeenth century, “emotion” was used of material objects [HEW 174].

Desire: Via the Latin verb *desiderare*, “desire” is parallel to “consider” (literally “put two

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2 London: Faber, 1957; rpt. 2nd edn Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1988 [StA]. Indeed, it was Barfield rather than Steiner himself who coined the term “evolution of consciousness.”

3 *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (1928; 2nd revised edition Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1984); *History in English Words* (1953; Great Barrington, MA: Lindesfarne Press, 1985) [HEW].

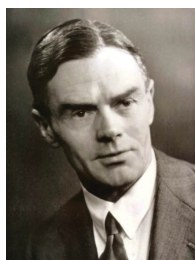
stars together”), *de* (from) + *sider-* (star). Both are artifacts of astrological paradigms, in which the motives of deeds and events are “influences” (another astrological term) flowing down from the stars.

There is a striking pattern here, and it will help us see it if we list the words vertically, suspending them as it were between the poles of “object” (i.e., things and events unfolding in the outer world, outside the self), and “subject” (i.e., private events unfolding within our own individual minds and souls):

OBJECT	idea theory emotion desire	SUBJECT
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And now the thought experiment: Where shall we draw the line (which you can do imaginatively now) between “subject” and “object” as just defined? Absent formal philosophical training and deliberate epistemological reflection (Barfield’s “beta thinking”), nearly all denizens of the modern world will experience ideas, theories, emotions, and desires—thinking, feeling, and willing—as something individual, private, and interior. We moderns draw a vertical line separating subject and object to the left of our four words, placing thinking, feeling, and willing on the “subject” side of the divide. *But the older consciousness out of which these words were born draws the line to their right.* It experiences thinking, feeling, and willing not as private, individualized, subjective events but as *events unfolding within the larger world.* In the older consciousness thinking, feeling, and willing are experienced as *macrocosmic.*

As our four etymologies show, the human thinking, feeling, and willing recorded from our earliest human records through the high Middle Ages were macrocosmic events that the individual human mind *participates.* “Participation” as applied to the evolution of consciousness is Barfield’s term, not Steiner’s, but it has a venerable pedigree, within both ancient and modern thought. Participation (*methexis*) is Plato’s way of explaining predication and all other mental relations, and it is also the term used by the founders of modern anthropology, Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim, to explain “primitive” structures such as those of shamanism and totemism. Barfield calls this “*original participation*” to distinguish it from a new kind of participation



Owen Barfield

that has only begun to emerge, beginning roughly with Romanticism, after a long eclipse of felt participation that both Steiner and Barfield term, felicitously, “onlooker consciousness.”

Once we develop an eye for it, evidence of “original participation” is so abundant that it is hard to know what to adduce first. A brief and vivid account is provided by Julian Jaynes’s *Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (1976).⁴ In his attempt to explain the biological evolution of human consciousness, Jaynes carefully examines Homer’s *Iliad* as the earliest record that can be reliably interpreted, and his conclusions are stunning:

There is in general no consciousness in the *Iliad* ... The words in the *Iliad* that in a later age come to mean mental things have different meanings, all of them more concrete. ... Achilles will fight “when the *thumos* in his chest tells him to and a god rouses him” (9:702ff.). But it is not really an organ and not always localized; a raging ocean has *thumos* [69].

... *Iliadic* men have no will of their own and certainly no notion of free will [70].

The characters of the *Iliad* do not sit down and think out what to do. They have no conscious minds such as we say we have, and certainly no introspections. It is impossible for us with our subjectivity to appreciate what it was like. When Agamemnon, king of men, robs Achilles of his mistress, it is a god that grasps Achilles by his yellow hair and warns him not to strike Agamemnon (I :197ff.). It is a god who then rises out of the gray sea and consoles him in his tears of wrath on the beach by his black ships, a god who whispers low to Helen to sweep her heart with homesick longing, a god who hides Paris in a mist in front of the attacking Menelaus, a god who tells Glaucus to take bronze for gold (6:234ff.), a god who leads the armies into battle, who speaks to each soldier at the turning points, who debates and teaches Hector what he must do, who urges the soldiers on or defeats them by casting them in spells or drawing mists over their visual fields. It is the gods who start quarrels among men (4:437ff.) that really cause the war (3:164ff.), and then plan its strategy (2:56ff.). It is one god who makes Achilles promise not to go into battle, another who urges him to go, and another who then clothes him in a golden fire reaching up to heaven and screams through his throat across the bloodied trench at the Trojans, rousing in them ungovernable panic. In fact, the gods take the place of consciousness. The be-

4 Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, pp. 67-83.

ginnings of action are not in conscious plans, reasons, and motives; they are in the actions and speeches of gods [72].

But ultimately Jaynes's account is reductive and disappointing. Because he lacks Steiner's understanding of the evolution of consciousness, Jaynes can only conclude that the ancient myths were mass hallucinations, literally a kind of schizophrenia (hence "bicameral mind") afflicting not just individuals, nor even isolated communities, but the whole of humanity.

Jaynes is sadly typical: one could make a long list of such books that are brimming with brilliant individual insights, but ultimately fail to situate them properly within a larger interpretive context. It is tempting to reimagine such studies in light of the evolution of consciousness, however briefly. Jaynes is too reductive for further notice, but let us consider two other influential books: Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962),⁵ and Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908).⁶

Kuhn's magnificent study, which every anthropologist should treasure, has utterly and irrevocably changed the way we think about science. The main argument is well known: the growth of scientific knowledge is anything but linear, let alone the kind of parabolic accumulation described in the introductory textbooks and popular scientific writing; rather it is radically discontinuous, a series of sudden shifts between incommensurable "paradigms" that suddenly reveal unprecedented ways of seeing, but also completely new phenomena. Through careful analysis of key episodes in the history of science, Kuhn was able to argue persuasively that scientists working under different paradigms in some very real sense "live in different worlds." Paradigm shifts are precipitated by rare intermittent crises, and the "normal science" that prevails as each paradigm unfolds—science as actually practiced—bears no resemblance to the methodological stereotype of falsification through direct comparison with nature. Kuhn's account was immediately and nearly universally recognized as superior to the master narrative that had preceded it.

Nevertheless, Kuhn leaves a number of troubling questions unresolved. If reductionism does not work, can there be progress in science in any real sense? If the history of science is so discontinuous that it cannot be ra-

tionally reconstructed, is science doomed to be governed by subjectivity and historical accident? It follows from Kuhn's account that scientific progress takes place not principally *within* paradigms, but rather *between* them. And it is just these revolutionary, "extra-paradigmatic" moments about which Kuhn has nothing to say. In multiple places he declares the succession of paradigms to be "arbitrary." Not only did Steiner anticipate Kuhn in many important ways: he and Barfield can explain very well why it is, for example, that Galileo and Newton follow Aristotle, but precede quantum mechanics. In a sentence, it's because "original participation" gives way to "onlooker consciousness," which then gives way to "final participation" in turn.

In his classic treatise on the history of art, we watch Worringer groping for the idea of the evolution of consciousness. He understands that the succession of paradigms (in this case, artistic styles in the broadest sense) is somehow *inwardly* motivated. Perusing the ethnographic collection of the Trocadéro Museum in Paris, Worringer suddenly intuited that humanity's relationship to the world is not unchanging; there is an "artistic volition" that has not been the same in all ages [10]. He goes astray, however, by ascribing this shift in representation to changing subjective responses, to "peoples' feeling about the world," their "psychic attitude toward the cosmos" [15], not realizing that (as instanced by our discussion of the *Iliad* above), *subjectivity itself arrives late on the scene*. Worringer's putative cause is rather an effect of something more fundamental: not a different reaction to the same set of phenomena, but a wholly different set of phenomena themselves. As Steiner and Barfield have taught (and as Kuhn later understood), it is not our feelings about the real world that change: collective representation, and hence reality itself, is what changes.

Noting that both primitive and modern art tend toward abstraction, Worringer rewrites the entire history of art from his new perspective. But the resulting schema is *exactly backwards*: the progression Worringer describes as epochs of "abstraction" on either side of a delving down into the "real" world must instead be described in Steiner's and Barfield's terms as one from "original" to "final" *participation*, interrupted by an eclipsing "onlooker consciousness." What characterizes "primitive" consciousness is not fear and withdrawal from the world, but rather (as not only Steiner and Barfield, but also Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim taught), an intensely intimate relationship of *participation*. Barfield's wonderful metaphors have medi-

5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). This 50th anniversary edition contains an important introductory essay by Ian Hacking.

6 Chicago: Dee, 1997. Many thanks to Jennie Cain, who prodded me to think about the relationship between Worringer and Steiner.

eval consciousness still “mortised into” the world [StA 78] and experiencing space “more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved” [StA 94]. Conversely, it is only in the Renaissance that abstraction and spatial depth arise as a general consciousness: that is why we speak of “Renaissance perspective.”

As a corrective to Worringer’s account, and as telling evidence of the reality of “onlooker consciousness,” let us consider briefly two specific episodes, neither of which is adduced by Steiner or Barfield. Both are profoundly symptomatic of this new relationship to the world that is precisely the opposite of Worringer’s description.

As James Hillman and others have argued, the Renaissance begins symbolically on April 26, 1336 with Petrarch’s ascent of Mont Ventoux,⁷ an event that witnesses not just a new sense of spatial depth, but also an equally powerful movement in the opposite direction, into a new sense of human *interiority*. Petrarch’s own account begins by explaining his motivations for this unprecedented⁸ act: the mountain had drawn his attention for years because it was “visible from a great distance,” and his only motivation, he claims, was “to see what so great an elevation had to offer.” On the summit, the first thing that strikes him is “the great sweep of view spread out before [him].” But that is not Petrarch’s only response. Surprisingly, the view prompts him to open Augustine’s *Confessions* at random, and in a moment of perfect Jungian synchronicity, his eye falls immediately upon a passage dismissing natural beauty in favor of self-knowledge. Petrarch immediately concludes, famously, that “nothing is wonderful but the soul, which, when great itself, finds nothing great outside itself. Then, in truth, I was satisfied that I had seen enough of the mountain; I turned my eye inward upon myself . . .” Returning home, the summit of the mountain seems in retrospect to be “scarcely a cubit high compared with the range of human contemplation.” *Pace* Worringer, Petrarch’s ascent of Mont Ventoux stands out because it is such an early and distinct symptom of “onlooker-consciousness”—of *separation* from the world.

7 *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), pp. 194–98. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), Hans Blumenberg likewise identifies Petrarch’s ascent as a profoundly symbolic episode, but he is unable to say exactly what has changed. Blumenberg is another great scholar who constantly comes up short because he lacks the concept of the evolution of consciousness.

8 This is not strictly true: in his own letter Petrarch reveals that a shepherd had ascended the mountain 50 years earlier. What is telling is that the experience had been lost on the shepherd, who complains that he “had gotten for his pains nothing except fatigue and regret.”

The other deeply symptomatic event is Galileo’s lectures on Dante’s *Inferno* (1587), in which he reduces Dante’s psychodrama to land surveying: Galileo proposes to calculate the physical dimensions of Hell. The spirit of this new mentality has been captured perfectly in an essay by the remarkable German poet Durs Grünbein⁹: “With each step, thinking is severed from concreteness—with enormous gains and enormous losses on both sides. At every turn, things and their mental representations retreat further from each other” [93]. Dante’s qualitative, dynamic topography of the soul gives way to sheer abstraction: “Galileo has long since entered another order, one of stasis and statics . . . He shall become the coordinator of static worlds, the lawfulness of Nature will obey his will, establishing itself in a vacuum, within the equilibrium of a pre-established harmony” [97]. “Away with qualities, which cannot be controlled. The senses stand in the way of knowledge” [98]; “The Golden Age of Reduction begins . . . It is also the end of the Harmony of the Spheres, of eschatologies, of interplanetary cosmic theater in a grand style” [100–101]. Sensory qualities are “secondary,” merely subjective; hence Galileo assures us that the fires of Dante’s Hell cannot actually be hot [102].

Worringer could not be more wrong about the art of “original participation,” and he fundamentally misconstrues the acme of abstraction in Renaissance “onlooker consciousness” as a confident merger of mind with “real” spatiality. Are we surprised then to find that he completely misunderstands modern art’s turn away from Naturalism as mere abstraction, motivated by fear of reality? Trapped in the “onlooker consciousness” of naïve realism, Worringer cannot begin to understand that artists such as (Steiner’s student!) Kandinsky had begun to cross the threshold into real spiritual experience. Alas, Kandinsky and other seekers of the spiritual in art read Worringer and were misled by him, in many places conflating spirituality with abstraction themselves. But that is another essay for another day.

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9 “Galileo Measures Dante’s Hell and Gets Hung Up on the Dimensions,” in his eponymous collection of essays (Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 89–104. Translations are my own.