

On Leslie Fieger's "Meta-rational thought"

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According to Leslie Fieger ("Meta-rational thought", *Journal of Non-Locality and Remote Mental Interactions*, Vol. I, Nr. 2, 2002, <http://www.emergentmind.org/fieger12.htm>), the gift of rational thinking has brought the human species to the threshold of a new era: a threshold of unimaginable potentiality to self-actuate or self-destruct, a threshold that can be for us either a precipice or a launching pad. In order for us to overcome this critical time, and to turn it into an opportunity of growth rather than into a final defeat, we have to develop a new vision of who we are: we must learn to become conscious, rather than unconscious, creators. In order to become fully aware of our own nature and creative potential, we must first understand the concept of consciousness.

So far, we have Fieger's general assumptions, and as far as they are concerned, I can agree with him to a certain extent. I too think that understanding our nature and potentialities will help us to solve the problems created by rational thinking. However, the merits rational thinking has had, and has, should not be overlooked: rational thinking is part of our own nature. I too think that it is necessary above all to investigate consciousness in order to become fully aware of ourselves and of our creative potential: but I also think that this investigation should be carried out in the wider context of the studies of the human mind.

What I cannot accept is the panpsychistic idea of consciousness he put forwards later in his text: "Every quark, every muon, every graviton, every electron, every photon and every neuron is consciousness". In his opinion, as far as I can understand, every part of the entire cosmos is conscious and acting in harmony with a common source – a universal consciousness.

If I refuse this idea is not on principle. Obviously, nothing can prevent us from the possibility of conceiving things in different ways from the usual ones. Everyone can propose new, unusual ways of seeing and considering things and events. By doing so, it is possible to give rise to new attitudes and stances, and to develop new analyses, research fields and theories. After all, one of the features of the human mind is precisely that of being able to perceive and categorize *at will* one and the same thing in different, new ways (for instance, a pencil can also be seen either as a "tool", a "thing", a "weapon", or a "piece of wood"), and different things in the same way (an "oak", a "weeping willow" and a "pine" are all "trees"). In my opinion, it is this very feature that should be considered as the hallmark that distinguishes the human species from the other known species: an

hallmark that any study intended to investigate human consciousness should take as the starting point for their analyses.

On the contrary, my refusal of Fieger's conception of consciousness is due to its lack of pragmatic utility for the scientific research. If everything is consciousness, and if consciousness is everywhere, how is it possible to distinguish and isolate it? How could we differentiate it from other phenomena, such as for instance the non-conscious or the unconscious? Saying that everything is consciousness is tantamount to admitting that consciousness cannot be studied, analyzed, or recognized: being so pervasive, it cannot be compared with anything, and therefore cannot even be described.

To be useful in any kind of investigation, any definition or concept should be operable, that is having the quality, the characteristic of a tool that can be used. Unfortunately, Fieger's definition of consciousness does not seem to me to be of any practical utility. When he says that consciousness is the primal source from where everything originate, thus suggesting that it is an unanalyzable and indecomposable *prius*, he precludes any chance of conceiving consciousness as composed of more elementary components, whether physical, biological, neuronal, social, or whatever. Consequently, he precludes any chance of analyzing it in relation to other levels of reality, and more in general of relating it to them. By so doing, he excludes the possibility of studying not only the way consciousness arises, but also the way it gives rise to other phenomena.

I repeat: on principle, I do not deny that consciousness, as anything else as well, can be seen in different ways, for instance either as the result of some process, as the process itself, or as something that gives rise to some process. Neither do I reject the possibility of considering and studying consciousness as a characteristic attributable to a subject - whether human, animal or divine -, or as a subject in itself. What matters is, first, the applicability of the new proposed idea or concept, second, the range of application, and third, the results we achieve by applying it. Rather, I suspect the validity of those ideas or concepts that, by definition, are considered or defined as irreducible.

I suppose that Fieger could object that my argument is based on, and is the outcome of, a pure utilitarian, pragmatic, rational way of thinking. As such, my argument would be vitiated by the very same limits that his concept of consciousness is supposed to overcome. This is only partially true. No doubt, my argument is based on a rational ground, and as such, it can only take a certain course and have certain characteristics. But, at the same time, I do not deny the possibility of enlarging the scope of rational thinking and improving the way it operates. It is precisely by becoming aware of the potentialities of our mind that I hope to attain this target. When we realize that mental activities gives us the possibility, at least to a certain extent, of overcoming the determinism and restrictions

the physical realm as well as others impose on us (as we have seen before, we can, for example, change at will our way of perceiving and categorizing things and events), we have found a way of compensating for the lacks and rigidity of rational thinking.

Fieger's concept of consciousness is certainly enthralling, but until it is further developed and defined in operative terms, it is doomed to remain only a suggestive but useless hypothesis.