
ALBERT LOW

Albert Low is currently director of the Montreal Zen Centre. He was a business executive until 1976, before he devoted himself full time to the practice of Zen Buddhism, and author of a highly original book on management and organisation, *Zen and Creative Management*, which was inspired by a fusion of ideas from Elliott Jacques and John Bennett. He then studied under Roshi Philip Kapleau and completed his training in 1986. His thinking about management centred on the significance of *dilemmas* – contradictions not allowing for compromise – and he has since pondered deeply on the significance of ambiguity. His essay here is an outstandingly clear discussion of the problematic unity of One and Two and indicates how an understanding of ambiguity can illuminate many questions such as the dichotomy of mind and body.

Towards a Logic of Ambiguity

Radically new concepts may be needed - recall the modifications of scientific thinking forced on us by quantum mechanics.

Crick and Koch

Most of those researching the mind take it for granted that it is a function of the brain. For example, of twelve articles in a special edition of *The Scientific American* devoted to mind and brain, only one dealt with consciousness itself. Francis Crick makes no bones about it. For him the question is, “How to explain mental events as being caused by the firing of large sets of neurons.”ⁱ On another occasion he said, “Your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and freewill, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”

Even so, in some philosophies, Western as well as Eastern, a long tradition exists in which the opposite is held to be the case. The Vedanta, the Yogacara school of Buddhism, Bishop Berkeley’s Idealism, are among those that affirm that the material world is but a mirage, a projection, of mental events. A school of thought in modern physics also states that quantum reality is a product of the mind. “No elementary phenomenon is a real phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon,” is the way one physicist put it.ⁱⁱ

Descartes, pointed up, for the West, the problem of the relation of mind and body with his famous dictum “I think therefore I am.” He established two independent realms, a thinking realm, *res cogitans*, and a physical realm, *res extensa*. Mind and matter, he said, run on parallel tracks and do not interact.

A fourth alternative, put forward by Wilder Penfield, the neurologist, considers that mind and matter are different, but interact in some way. The commonsense point of view also

says that “I” make a decision, and the body carries it out, or the body is affected by a perception, and the mind makes an image.

These four points of view are independent and mutually exclusive. If Crick is right then Bishop Berkeley, Wilder Penfield and Descartes are mistaken. If one of these is right then the others are mistaken.

Underlying these viewpoints is yet another problem. Is the world fundamentally one or two; monism or dualism? Crick and Berkeley are both monists; Descartes and Penfieldⁱⁱⁱ; are dualists.

So who is right? Who wrong? I cannot help thinking of the trial judge who, on hearing the case for the prosecution, exclaimed, “You are right!” On hearing the case for the defense he said, “Of course! You are right!” The clerk of the court, hot under the collar, leaped up and said, “M’lud, they can’t both be right!” “You’re right!” said the judge.

An author of a popular work on logic said, “to tolerate contradiction [or ambiguity] is to be indifferent to truth. For the person who, whether directly or by implication, knowingly both asserts and denies one and the same proposition, shows by that behavior that he does not care whether he asserts what is false and not true, or whether he denies what is true and not false....for whenever and wherever I tolerate self-contradiction, then and there I make it evident, either that I do not care at all about truth, or that at any rate I do care about something else more.^{iv}”

Either monism or dualism, either Crick or one of the others. The question is not trivial. How we answer these questions is the way we shall regard, and act, towards ourselves and others. But the problems we are faced with when we contemplate life, are not simply confined to the mind body problem. Do we create the world or do we discover it? Is a photon a wave or particle? Does God exist or doesn’t he exist? The problems can be multiplied endlessly. We are bedeviled by the ‘either or’ straightjacket wherever we look.

Look at the following picture. What do you see?



One person will see a young woman, another will see an old woman. Who is right? With classical logic it is either one or the other. But which is the one? And why should we favor this one over the others. R.D.Laing, the psychiatrist, said on one occasion, “This same thing, seen from different points of view, gives rise to two entirely different descriptions, and the descriptions give rise to two entirely different theories, and the theories result in two entirely different sets of action.” However, as he went on to point out, we are not talking about a dualism of two different substances. Rollo May, another well known psychologist, pointed out that ‘the human dilemma is that which arises out of a man's capacity to experience himself as both subject and object at the same time.’ But the dilemma goes deeper than that and wars have been waged because of this dilemma.

We are dealing with *ambiguity*. The word ‘ambiguous’ comes from another word *ambi*, meaning ‘two.’ Furthermore, if we look more closely, we shall see an ambiguity within an ambiguity. One undifferentiated field exists before the two alternatives. Out of that field, the duality emerges. Once the duality has emerged the one field is no longer there. We cannot say that the one field *underlies* the duality, any more than we can say the young woman *underlies* the old woman. That would be to go beyond what is given. Thus a new ambiguity arises, a oneness/two ness ambiguity. [I shall use (/) to denote ambiguity.] We can spell the ambiguity out as One/(young/old woman). Putting this into words we can now say that *there is an ambiguity, one face of which says there is no ambiguity, the other says there is ambiguity.*

Returning to the mind body problem, we find that it is no longer a problem but an ambiguity. One/(mind/body) or, to generalize, One (knowing/being)

In Hinduism the formulation *chitsatananda* : *chit* is knowing, *sat* is being and *ananda* is joy. In other words within *chitsatananda*, lies knowing, being. One comes across a similar formulation in Buddhism with the term *bodhisattva*. *Bodhi* means knowing, *sattva*, being.

The German mystic Meister Eckhart said on one occasion that God's knowing is his being. If God is Unity, then Eckhart is saying One: knowing,being. A very similar idea is put forward by the *rDzogs-chen*, a major school of thought of Tibetan Buddhism. '*rDzogs*' means completeness, and '*chen*' undivided wholeness. [oneness] According to this school of thought *gzhi*, is the Ground. [being] Later it says, ‘[an] additional factor of intelligence [knowing] inheres in the very dynamics of the unfolding universe itself, and which makes primordially of experience of paramount importance.’

In other words, the formulation One/(knowing/being has respectable ancestry.

The meaning of “One,” in the formulation, is so subtle that in a short essay this meaning can only be hinted at. Oneness is dynamic. Rather than speak of One, we could say, “let there be One!” Oneness is an imperative, force if you wish. It is not *a* force or *the* force. Such designations would define it, limit it. It is like the Word of God, which in Hebrew is *dabhar*, meaning the power behind that drives forward. In Buddhism, Oneness is *sunyata*, emptiness, which points to the unlimited, undefined quality of Unity. It is not *in* the

universe,^v but is rather the universe in action. As we said earlier, oneness does not *underlie* knowing being. To appreciate the dynamic quality of oneness one must know it in one's muscles

The dynamism of Oneness comes from the contradictory nature of oneness. Oneness is both inclusive and exclusive. For example, oneness may manifest as intuition on the one hand and analysis on the other. Intuition reaches out to include the maximum in its grasp; analysis is reductive and cuts any manifold into smaller units. Cosmically Oneness is both the universe and the centre. It is only within the limited human mind that the Big bang and the modern universe is separated by billions of years. In a greater mind they would be simultaneous. Oneness then is itself ambiguous. Yet this is impossible because oneness is an imperative: "Let there be one!" "Let there be no contradiction or ambiguity" It is from this injunction that classical logic derives its authority

The full formulation of the logic of ambiguity then reads: *There is an ambiguity one face of which says there is ambiguity, the other face of which says there is no ambiguity. This face however is not unambiguous.*

Let us now return to our question about the mind body relation.

Resonance

Resonance is an interesting phenomenon because it arises out of the "one is two; two are one" ambiguity with which we are now familiar. Strike the tone C on a piano, and the tone C an octave higher will resonate. This is so because C and C an octave higher, vibrate in sympathy because they are One, they are both tone C, they are one even though they are different. To go from C1 to C2 one has to pass through six other tones; so they are manifestly different. But tone C is still tone C.

Let us use this as an analogy and see where it leads.

Tone C1 and tone C2 are One, both are C

The tone C1 is one tone, the tone C2 is another; they are quite different.

However, because of the unity underlying C1 and C2, resonance is possible between them.

Knowing/being is One : a quantum,

Knowing/being is two; neither knowing nor being is subordinate to the other, nor do they interact. However, because of the unity underlying knowing and being, resonance is possible.



In the ambiguous picture the young woman cannot interact with the old woman simply because the old woman is nowhere to be found. To say she is present 'in potential' is simply to start weaving a verbal web. However let us change something about the young woman, let us give her a necklace.

The mouth of the old woman is changed! Although no interaction of any kind has occurred between the two, a change in the one has brought about a change in the other.

We now discover that all the four different theories that we referred to above, in their own way, are right. The parallelist is right: the two, matter and mind, have no interaction. The materialist is right: one can investigate the mind objectively with the hypothesis that it is all a question of molecules, because, with the objective viewpoint, no subject can be found. If we see the old woman, where could we ever find the young woman? Thus, from this point of view all talk about decisions, values, judgments and so on is just very sloppy thinking. The Mind only school is right: one can look upon the mind as an autonomous field. The interactionist is right, a change in the mind does cause changes in the body and vice versa, even though no communication exists between the two. Furthermore every change registered by knowing is reflected in being, and vice versa.

The reason for this magic is the ambiguity, One/(knowing/being). The change in the young woman is a change of the one field; because the one field is changed, the old woman, as manifestation of the one field is also changed. Furthermore the changes can be observed via the young woman, via the old woman or via unity itself.

Finally, with the formulation One/(knowing being), Oneness, which is independent of both knowing and being, finds a place. All religions have recognized a dimension outside of the realm of mind and matter. This dimension has been lost sight of mainly because theology has attempted to prove the existence of God through the use of logic. Where this logic has fallen down, the cracks have been shore up by dogma. The way is now laid open, with the logic of ambiguity, for a thorough revision of theology.

However the value of the logic of ambiguity is not confined simply to what has been given above. My belief is that it could bring about a revolution in the humanities which generally speaking are all but exhausted as disciplines at the moment. For example it could enable us to gain greater understanding of such diverse subjects as creativity, decision making, humor, metaphor, the Mass, music, and in particular the connection between music and emotions, the attraction of soccer, zen koans, and many other aspects of life. I make a case for this belief in a book, *The Creation of Consciousness, a study in creativity*,

ⁱ Crick, Francis and Koch Christof (1992) The Problem of Consciousness (The Scientific American, Special Issue, Sept. 1992)

ⁱⁱ Herbert, Nick (1987) Quantum Reality: Beyond the New Physics (Anchor Press: New York) p. 16

ⁱⁱⁱ In fact he hovered between the two viewpoints.

^{iv} Flew, Andrew (1975) Thinking about Thinking (Fontana Glasgow)

^v The word universe means "turning towards the One."
