

Article

Transformations of Self and World I: *Modeling a World*

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Abstract

Severe seasonal depression entails the yearly collapse and reconstruction of a functional, useable, meaningful world. This radical annual transformation provides a unique perspective onto fundamental conscious processes by illuminating the cognitive elements and dynamics behind the construction and deconstruction of self-models and world-models.

Key words: self-model, world-model, world-modeling, cognition, cognitive scaffolding, consciousness, seasonal depression, S.A.D., transformational experience, meaning-making, meaninglessness, empiricism, existentialism, absolute truth.

Transformational experiences are most often interpreted as mystical and are conveyed in a familiar narrative – the seeker, after performing the correct privations and meditations (or after ingesting the right chemicals) attains to the profound experience, a full loss of self, a vision unto the oneness of everything. The result is a sense of compassion that the seeker (now turned visionary) is compelled to manifest in his or her life. My own transformational experience is very similar: the loss of self, the experience of boundless space, and the arrival at compassion; but it is not the result of a choice to experience an alternative perspective. I am not a seeker. And, rather than a diligent struggle toward a bright shining moment of clarity, more diligent energies than I can possibly tally have been spent struggling in the other direction – crawling and clawing my way out of an interminable mind-state of no self, no world, no time, no distinctions, no objects, no judgments, no meanings. The truth of the matter is no one can function in that realm. It's a great place to visit but you would not want to live there. When dragged there and kept there against one's will, one must fight one's way out or perish.

My unwilling transformation occurs annually, is long and arduous, and has typically resulted in a full loss of self and the full deconstruction of reality. Though I am skeptical of all narratives, the psychological one gives a reasonable context for its explanation in the diagnosis of severe seasonal depression. My case, according to the clinical explanation, is exacerbated by the negligence and violence of unstable parents, by an extended period of

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overlapping traumas, but is probably most acutely affected by an unusually high degree of physical isolation in the period from my birth until my 4th year of life. Whether or not the clinical narrative can fully account for it, the experience I have is of a fully integrated world of meaning and interconnectivity in the summer that in the winter is replaced by a realm of radical meaninglessness and disconnect, a loss of feeling, a loss of a sense of self, a loss of familiarity (of place and people), a loss of recognition (of what objects and substances are for, including food), and, at its nadir, a temporary loss of the ability to physically function – a catatonic state. In the spring everything shifts toward unification and reintegration while in the fall everything shifts toward disintegration and non-existence. First there is a world, then there is no world, then there is a world, on and on, year after year.

The perspective I have after many decades of such transformations is one of deep empathy toward the entirety of the living world, and is a perspective that provides a useful analytical angle into the issue of conscious processes and dynamics – particularly the role of conscious processes and dynamics in the modeling of a useable world. Whereas most people effortlessly employ the hidden assumptions necessary to subconsciously create and maintain a seamless, stable, functioning model of the world, from a very young age I have had to be fully conscious of the construction of a useable world and I have had to remain consciously active in its repair and maintenance. These constructions become effortless in the spring and summer months when I feel fully caught up in them but are impossible to maintain in midwinter when after considerable struggle, I must inevitably surrender to the catatonic state.

Up until a handful of years ago, the condition had a distinct bipolar element. I could neither imagine nor plan for how my mind would be in the winter when it was summer and I could neither imagine nor plan for how my mind would be in summer when it was winter. The two mindsets are radically different and I could not see a whole year using either one. Until recently, the two parts of the year were never connected in my thinking. Many years of therapy were instrumental in overcoming that bipolarity. My therapist reflected my winter self back to me in summer and my summer self back to me in winter. I learned to incorporate the two mindsets into a single understanding of who I am. This has led in recent years to noticeable improvements, a gradual diminishment in the severity of the experience, and an ability to incorporate my experience of two radically different mind-states into a useful analysis of cognitive processes.

As a result of the cyclical and bipolar nature of S.A.D. and as a result of its extreme formulation within me, I have experienced the commonly shared world-model that seems so self-evident to everyone else, from the inside, and then the outside, and then the inside, and then the outside – so many times that it is impossible for me to hold the same view of

reality that others do. Though I would love to be able to, I do not and cannot hold the same assumptions. A lifelong necessity of having to fabricate a functioning version of reality on my own renders it more obvious to me why our world-models should be constructed the way they are, how they come to be constructed thus, and why certain assumptions work so wonderfully well. I understand the purpose of such a construction and I do not assume any of its conceptual elements to be givens or absolutes or inherent truths in the way that nearly everyone else does. By simply having to maneuver my given circumstances I have inadvertently become an expert in the art and science of world-modeling. Perhaps more keenly than others, I see the central importance of creature-specific world-modeling processes in the existence of *all* sentient entities. Seeing the vital cognitive dimension of awareness and intention as central in all life processes gives cause for a deep concern regarding the state of the living world.

It is quite easy to dismiss my perspective as a diagnosable clinical condition, which in a very real sense it is, for it would naturally interfere with anyone's ability to survive as an individual much less to function as a socially and economically viable one. My own survival is through sheer luck: of friendship, of circumstances, and in an odd, sad way I was quite lucky it started so early in my life. It is harder for adults who have never experienced major depression to contextualize episodes of complete disintegration, of complete emptiness, of absolute meaninglessness, which by the meager pseudo-philosophical standards of the prevailing market-driven culture is a shameful, unforgiveable failure – people kill themselves in the face of it. I have been contextualizing this disintegration and reintegration since childhood. I have solid habits to see myself through, and I have many well-worn methods for hiding my efforts, even from my closest friends.

This back and forth world-view transformation has innumerable downsides (to put it mildly), but there are two small upsides: a clear-eyed perspectival locus located a considerable distance from our common muddled workaday assumptions about reality, and, as mentioned above, a useful non-standard view into the function and dynamics of conscious processes and their role in the task of creating a creature-appropriate, task-appropriate, milieu-appropriate world-model. By describing the experience of this annual transformation I hope to illustrate how a view into these few upsides can have considerable value in the development of a field of consciousness studies. The perspective I am left with after 40 to 50 transformational episodes can be helpful in illuminating the subject of consciousness, primarily by providing an example of world-modeling that may prove useful in the eventual development of a basic model of the process itself. I attempt here to illustrate the transformational experience and the uses of the perspective it provides.

Please note that seasonal depression, even if it *is* the best way to describe my transformation, is inaptly named. The winter depression is one small portion of a cycle that encompasses the entire year. The day to day changes in this cycle tend to be small, slow, and subtle, and they do not become the concern of the clinical realm until the changes interfere with successful functioning, as it especially does at its midwinter nadir. In its most severe form it is not so subtle. I become functionally frozen. This freeze is not from fear or anxiety (although both play a major role leading up to my surrender to catatonia). I simply do not recognize my own body as relevant and I cannot make sense of the objects, noises, and textures I perceive. There is still a view from somewhere but that perspectival locus isn't attached to anything that can make sense of the physical space, or of time; nor can it recognize the relevance of a self/world boundary. The perspective is still from a kind of somewhere, but it can only be described as nowhere. It is not a place with shareable reference points. Were I not dragged to this mind-state against my will, it might look beautiful. I receive visual information from the location of my eyes, however, that location is not privileged or important or integral to the experience I am having in that state, and the information or stimuli is not of distinctions and relationships; the world is not ordered in a recognizable or useful way, it just... is. Had I chosen to be there, had I come in the proper frame of mind and with the pre-expectation of interpreting it spiritually, or even if I just knew that I could control the experience and leave it when I wished, it would indeed be illuminating. But because I have seen this whole cycle consistently destroy the momentum of my relationships, my education, my career, etc.; because it strips away all the things I need to be a human I have tended to regard it as a loathsome, pernicious sea of meaninglessness – a view of nothing, the void. The *I* is not there, the *world* is not there. Awareness persists but there is no context to latch it to, or rather the context *is* nothing, which is just what everything is when there are no distinctions. In such a state there is nothing to be done, no way to do it, and no available self to observe on its behalf, no available self to participate or to perform. Catatonia is the inevitable result.

This state can last from a few hours to a week or more and can recur a few times each winter. The time element does not register while I am in that state and can only be worked out in retrospect. While in it, it feels eternal, and that eternal feeling is what I most feared growing up, whenever I felt myself sliding into its grip. It feels like free-falling into a deep hole, and once I'm in it I will be there forever. And in terms of the logic of the experience itself, that is entirely true. From inside that mind-state it *is* eternal, endless, exit-less, and I *am* there forever – frozen, free-floating/free-falling – in a void.

But, by the terms and logic of the regular workaday world, it does not last forever. The first useful and very beautiful concept that arises in me, to stir me from these messy and debilitating episodes, is the notion of a boundary between my body and the world. I am

here. I am this and not that. This conceptualization arises in me suddenly and shockingly. And in order to persist as an entity, in order to maintain the self/world boundary, I must *do* something about it, usually something to obtain nutrition. A big problem arises. The doing has to be done in a particular matrix of phenomenal parameters that I have to work out from scratch – my mind is supremely addled, completely empty of content. I have to work out a matrix of *doing* suitable to what it is I find I am (a bizarre and impossibly heavy rubbery body, with a spine down the middle, long bendable limbs that are frayed at the ends, some of the frayed parts can grasp, thank heaven). Whatever matrix of doing I configure in relation to this entity must also be suitable to the purpose. The *doing* must effect the movement of this particular type of entity toward a nutrient rich environment. Like any lazy single modern urban male, I have a standing delivery order for southern fried chicken with mashed potatoes and garlic spinach on speed dial with a credit card on file. But nothing is familiar and nothing makes sense. Figuring to push the correct button, getting the corpus to the door, waiting for the downstairs buzzer, pushing the lobby entry button, manipulating the apartment door, the grunted interaction with a delivery-being, are all extremely complicated conceptually. I am not always able and not always willing. I don't always know the meaning of the objects, the history of the place, or who and what I am. I have to *become* a being and that being has to become an amateur scientist with his conceptual tools ideologically limited to the classical realm. I must coordinate the interaction of a particular kind of body with the phenomenal parameters of a particular kind of environment in a causal-mechanical relationship. I have to keep force-focusing the otherwise free-floating/free-falling awareness onto just this one particular corpus in this one particular kind of matrix of properties, to achieve one particular kind of thing – nutrition.

I must formulate and include the element of linear time because all the actions have to occur in a specific order to add up to a successful behavioral episode with which to achieve that nutrition. Push button to order food, body to door, listen for buzz, push entry button, open door, grunt, close door, food into hole, gnash with teeth, swallow. It can only work in that order so an idea of order is vital. The concept of linear order is my meal ticket, literally. I must hold onto this ticket for future use. There seems little room for failure and no room whatsoever for a free-floating/free-falling view of nothingness nor for a view onto its true opposite, the infinite phenomenal properties and characteristics that are irrelevant to the vital task at hand. Awareness must align with the body and stay there. The aware body must focus every available mental and caloric resource into a narrow tunnel-vision range of physical properties and causal dynamics. This range and this focus and this purpose (control, certainty) are the simplified origin of empirical science and I cannot afford to be distracted from its basic tenets, and I cannot afford to take notice of anything else... *except for the other thing.*

The only other very vital thing is that I must formulate and hold onto the notion that it is worth it to make the effort to get the corpus to the door, to get the food, to put the horrifying dead stuff into the horrifying hole in my horrifying face. In order to persist I must actively choose to believe that some larger meaning will one day reveal itself to put this grotesque and incomprehensible struggle into a more obvious context of purpose and meaning. I must choose to trust that the future will provide a good purpose and a good meaning for whatever is happening in the not-so-good-seeming present. I must have faith. Without any sense of history or future, without memory or hope, without any comprehension of how I could ever escape the small self-contained circle of illogic I find myself in, I must project forward to an unknown realm that I will never reach. I must project an imaginary conceptual matrix of non-specific meanings and purposes that will function to compel me onward. I must build an imaginary conceptual matrix in which hope is possible. Unlike the causal-physical realm that I am fabricating as I go and to which I am aligning all my actions, I do not ever need to reach this other theoretical realm or to fully understand the details of its inherently good meanings and purposes. The projection *is* the purpose. The ultimate utility of this forward projection is the imaginary *reverse* projection of meaning from this imagined meaning-laden future, reflecting positive meaning back here into the meaning-absent present. I can do this forward/backward time trick because I have just worked out a linear sense of time to perform the vital actions necessary for successful nutrition.

The timeline concept reifies the whole process. I can picture nutrition in the linearly defined future and I can use that future as the backdrop for the projection of positive meaning and I can conflate the two things (food = hope). And I have to do this. To get to the future it has to be formulated as desirable. I have to want it. *Me*, the organism that I now claim as myself (by aligning my awareness to the boundary of its morphology) must find a way to *want* to persist into the next few moments, and then the next... and this forward/backward projection of meaning trick is the tidiest and most economical solution. I have to build, own, and maintain the assumption that participation in this self-limited matrix of boundaries, dimensions, causation, and time is well worth the cost. If I do not do this I fall back into catatonia, remain unfed, lose my boundary, die. That is the alternative. Without a value-scale to judge my alternatives, I could make the wrong choice. I haven't yet got a value-scale and the choice is far too complicated for my simple addled mind. I project the working-out of the all the important details of meaning and purpose unto some other unreachable unknowable time and location. I defer the question. I assume for now that the answer from the future place and time will be a beneficent "yes". I choose the struggle of life by formulating and projecting an equation that pre-decides the choice of life for me. It is the simplified origin of religion.

In short, in order to live, the fundamental equation is this: I must actively align awareness with the self/world boundary of the body, I must coordinate my morphology in a causal-mechanical way, and I must project the possibility of meaningfulness to a time and place somewhere ahead of me since it is not available in the present place and time. Every year I must work this out anew and on my own. I must grope my way, initially without memory, without recognition, or habits, or mental resources. I have to rebuild the world from these few cognitive elements. It is exhausting and every year I think I am done for, that I cannot survive the eternal self-less, world-less state (which is true, the self that thinks I am done for is indeed obliterated). Every year I think that I cannot ever climb my way out of its grip (also true, within the circle of logic particular to that mind-state all physical and metaphorical actions become not just impossible and irrelevant but impossible and irrelevant forever). Every year I think I simply cannot do it (also true, nothing can be done in the eternal nothingness), and yet somehow I *do* do it. I eventually build my way back to the workaday world. Unfortunately there is nothing there to remind me that I've done it before or how I did it. And yet by logic I am not actually without mental resources. Though I have to work out the details of the physics and the meanings, I intuitively know I need to press the button for food and to get the body to the door and to put the food into the face-hole, to chew it and to swallow it. It feels new each time and yet an observer would see that I do have resources, assumptions, and habits that function on my behalf regardless of my inability to illuminate their source.

Yet it is useful to recount the process just as I perceive it. In the reconstruction of my world from a catatonic state a number of conceptual elements emerge as fundamental:

1. The self/world boundary
2. The entity described within this boundary
3. The awareness aligned with this entity
4. This entity's boundary awareness intentionally focused on a specific matrix of creature-appropriate dimensional space
5. This entity's boundary and spatial awareness intentionally focused on causal relationships within that space
6. This entity's boundary, spatial, and causal awareness intentionally focused on a linear-timed ordering of causal events
7. This entity's projection of the positive valuation of participating in the format for biological survival that is mapped out by these combined uses of intentional awareness.

Only with these fundamental *cognitive* elements in place can I begin to reckon with the details relevant to persisting as a living thing. Because this process began long before I had

words for what I was doing I recognize that these awareness types are not just linguistic concepts. I need this basic world-model structure, this matrix of interrelated awareness-types (and the concepts which represent them) in order that my persisting will not only makes sense as a purpose but is thereby rendered possible, and even inevitable. *Persisting* becomes the explicit purpose of the reality I seem to create from scratch, a reality that I make possible but which makes me possible in return. To persist I must create a model that creates a reality of its own.

A spectrum of values emerges related to the *persisting* purpose and the values become increasingly articulated and specific. Anything that supports persisting is value-tagged as good; anything that thwarts persisting is value-tagged as bad. Further distinctions must be made in that some good things are only good in certain contexts, certain amounts, certain times, certain situations, etc. I build a roster of more and more complex meanings that are fully dependent on space, time, and causality concepts and which are directly related to my persisting purpose. Objects and noises begin to make more sense when their values, uses, and meanings can be discerned in this purpose-related way. When the objects and noises begin making sense the context for the objects and noises, the apartment itself, begins to feel safe and more familiar. My body then begins to make more sense as well and my presence becomes reified by all the objects, noises, and contexts for things that are now recognized as relating to *me*, to *my* body, to *my* purpose, to *my* life. The logic and interrelationship of things, including the element of time, begin to take on a fuller and richer shape. The complexity and the feeling of familiarity of this realm slowly and steadily grow.

Over time, the recognition of objects and relationships is increasingly enriched in cross-pollinating counterpoint, and this triggers associated memories and emotional responses to things that also begin increasing in richness and complexity. Once these emotions, memories, inner voice, and interrelated meanings are in place and fully activated they begin to take over and have their own effortless momentum. I let myself into the flow of it. I let myself believe that the substructure of a self, plus assumptions about volitional capabilities, plus values related to these assumptions, and then the emotions, memories and interrelated meanings that accrue upon these, all combine to describe *inherent* features of an *actual* world rather than a self-fabricated mental construct self-designed for a specific purpose. For the sake of cognitive economy I invest in the model I make as if it were an accurate description of the world *out there*. A sense of easy movement, meaningfulness, and purposefulness arises, swells in intensity, reaches a glorious peak sometime in mid-summer, and then the thing arcs and begins to bend slowly back toward the other direction again with incremental losses and disconnections, becoming ever more debilitating as the winter progresses, and I am finally and unwillingly surrendered again to nothingness and

baseline catatonia. It is a tough fight in either direction, to build the world on the way up, and then to defend its construction and use against constant incomprehensible and inconsolable losses on the way down. And I have always, since I was small, to be building a reasonable facsimile on the side, a parallel world with which to fake my way through thick and thin.

Among the many things I had to figure out on my own as a child was how to fake it when the purposes, meanings, concepts and interconnectivity of things were not registering, which was about half the year. I learned how to build a facsimile cognitive structure that would at the very least allow me to pass as a member of the same world as everyone else. I had to pay attention. I had to observe and cultivate behaviors. I had to find a way into the logic of behavioral assumptions. I employed consciously and by force what others were employing subconsciously by habits and assumptions. It is an exhausting process to have to think everything through based on a common logic that I do not naturally possess myself; and so much of it seemed so nonsensical, yet it was far better to defer to what was given than to draw attention to myself by speaking up about the obvious flaws in people's assumptions. I've hidden this process and my perspective all my life as best I can by aping appropriate behaviors and responses whenever possible. But not having had a word or explanation or forum for it all these years, it was not a shareable thing anyway.

Because it is so gargantuan a difficulty, my habit has been to isolate myself in winter. The constant construction of the world and the necessary astute observation of reactions to my attempts at normalcy, all masked in secrecy and feigned nonchalance, are supremely stressful at a time of year when I have dwindling amounts of physical and mental energy with which to cope with basic functions. As the winter season progresses social situations become infinitely too complex to interpret and even the closest of companions that give such pleasure in summer start to slip away. I feel them falling away into a familiar realm of unfamiliarity, the winter place where the very same characters that so enriched my existence through summer become complex problems in exhausting equations I can no longer decipher. People in my life have quietly adjusted to this summer sociability and winter isolation without ever questioning me much about it. In the summer my nearest and dearest are perceived as fully integrated aspects of my own heart. By the midwinter portion of the cycle all people have become just skin, hair, teeth, un-interpretable noise, and unpredictable movement, which fills me with nervous fear and revulsion, and this is usually at a point in the cycle when I have the least amount of energy of the kind that is required to mask actual reactions and ape normal ones. I am full of such energy in the summer when I do not necessarily need it, and I am drained of it in winter when it would most save me from the humiliation of exposing my embarrassing, world-destroying emptiness.

The weeks surrounding midwinter are the most difficult. Though many people find Christmas stressful, I have found it unspeakably nightmarish, even in the presence of people I know to be truly lovely. But I can absolutely see, particularly why northern Europeans would require a bright and colorful midwinter holiday in which to assert a sudden culture-wide ethos of communal love, generosity, and interconnectedness, precisely when, in the grayest gloom and chill, we are least able to call forth those vital elements within ourselves on our own. We institute a means to enforce good cheer precisely when we need it most. My seasonal cycle, though severe, is just an exaggeration of a regular seasonal cycle quite typical for those of northern European descent. Many people notice within themselves an increase of vitality in the summer, a dwindling of enthusiasm in winter. Christmas, falling un-coincidentally at the nadir of midwinter darkness (with the vibrant use of lights and the colors of blood and verdure, the narratives regarding the birth of our salvation, the intoxicating nog version of mother's milk, free gifts on a magic sleigh, the incessant singing, the intense desire to believe in miracles, etc.) is but a thinly veiled survival strategy for a complex social organism that cannot hibernate but generally does not winter well. There is no other excuse for such excesses. Though I am usually too far gone, it clearly would do wonders for me were I only mildly fallen at that time of year.

Given this cycle in this clime, it is clear why northern European philosophers tie their understanding of nothingness (which more frequently arises in introspection at the winter season) to the bare, cold, dark, dead, ice-covered, winter landscape. Though meaninglessness is an entirely neutral affair (simply an absence of meaning) I can see how it would be culturally/geographically interpreted as negative, as an absence of life, as anti-life. I can see how our deep-seated assumptions, built upon seasonal rhythms and the cultural, biophysical, and psychological reaction to coldness and darkness, inform everything about the experience of a loss of meaning – from its perceived characteristics to its diagnosis and treatment. Despite the obvious fact that the culture itself (particularly in its present über-materialistic self-enthralled manifestation) provides the context in which experiences of meaninglessness would by logic inescapably arise, the cultural impulse is to medicate and isolate the errant individuals who blasphemously confess to experiencing it rather than to analyze the social forces and assumptions which create the experience and define its characteristics. Our impulse as a cultural unity is to proactively deny the possibility of meaninglessness by denying the legitimacy of the experience in others and quarantining *the crazy ones* who cannot sufficiently hide the reality of meaninglessness from the rest of us. The bulk of my own dilemma, though primed by unfortunate circumstances, has quite a lot to do with the culture's fear-based reaction to meaninglessness, the culture's inability to allow room for the legitimacy of that experience,

and the culture's inability to allow those who *can* comprehend the neutrality of meaninglessness to speak with any authority about it from the useful perspective it provides.

The philosophical limitations of the culture disallow us to comprehend and countenance it in its pure and simple form as a neutral space of no meaning – meaninglessness as the natural and necessary backdrop for the construction of all meaning. The culture is as yet unready to acknowledge a space of no-meaning due to an unwillingness to reevaluate the outdated notion of absolute truth. Thus, if I want my own experience to be understood I must transcribe it into one of two meaning-laden, meaning-inherent options that people can actually hear. And it must be in a narrative format with a beginning, a middle, and an end, regardless of the fact that seasonal depression is part of a common human and animal rhythm with a year-long cycle that has no beginning and no end. In order to be heard I can illustrate the change of states from summer to winter, starting in the full bloom of meaningful interconnections and ending up in the existential horror-show of catatonia, which has a distinct emotional outcome. Or I can tell it from the other emotional direction where I am delivered from the existential horror-show to a healthy normal(ish) experience of interrelatedness. People demand meaning-laden versions of meaninglessness; they require a context for no-context.

The difference between the narrative telling of it and my actual experience is that I am not in a position to take the emotional reading of either meaning-laden narrative version as the final fact of the matter – I feel both versions but I cannot assume that either the winter to summer or the summer to winter narrative provide the correct emotional reading and I cannot assume that either the winter or the summer mental state is either normal or clinical. I must, in my own life and perspective, incorporate all of it as standard issue mental states and dynamics, and in so doing I am more able than others to see the construction and deconstruction of self and world without the kinds of narrative assumptions, psychological reductions, and emotional interpretations that others would inevitably read into it. To survive my own cognitive dynamics I have been obliged to create an interpretive perspective through which I can comprehend the construction and deconstruction of a useable world-model in its entirety, without emotional reads, without the culture's fear of meaninglessness, and without the culture's hidden assumptions – the unspoken cultural belief in the world's supposed *absolute truths* and its supposedly *inherent* characteristics and meanings.

I witness the personal and cultural creation of preferred phenomenal characteristics, qualities, truths, values, and meanings from a unique perspective. I am fully conscious of it. I see the scaffolding of awareness types, the purposes behind this scaffolding, and the

meaning-making/meaning-projection processes with which we flesh out the scaffolding. All of it is necessary and vital to being a living thing. Our culture has very confused and complex self-deluding subterfuges regarding all aspects of this world-modeling process, particularly as regards meaning-making. We pretend we are not making meaning, that meaning does not exist, and/or that it is not important, while we simultaneously shape all our behaviors and goals based on the meanings we say are not there, are not important, do not exist, are not self-created. Because I am consciously aware of the processes I do not and cannot hide it from myself, or pretend I am not a part of its construction and projection, or pretend that the meanings are god-given or an inherent aspect of the external world. I can be both in it and of it. I can own meaning-making in a way most people cannot, precisely *because* I have learned in some respects to countenance meaninglessness. My experience has made me less afraid than most people to view the background *blank-slate* of meaninglessness onto which all of our personal and cultural meaning-making is being projected. In general, people pretend there is no such thing as meaninglessness (despite that every adult human has taken an occasional personal dip into its doubts, confusions, and culturally-predetermined existential despair).

In a culture-wide world-view based on empirical precepts both meaning and meaninglessness are purported not to exist. We prefer to pretend that we are not involved in making or maintaining meanings because that would indicate that the meanings themselves are not inherent to the world, and as rational empiricists we could not possibly value or respect any meaning that we subjectively created and communally projected ourselves. Our cultural fear of meaninglessness is actually nothing more than a well-hidden fear of disappointed expectations: as a culture we naively expect *inherent* meaningfulness just as we naively expect *absolute* truths. The unspoken fear is that we could not possibly weather such disappointed expectations when in point-of-fact a clear-eyed view unto the self-creation and projection of all meanings places the ball in our court as individuals and as a culture. We can take charge of the meaning-making process like never before, with conscious clarity, with pragmatic purpose and visionary intentions, rather than as a knee-jerk intuitive subconscious reaction to random historical events and circumstances.

My non-standard perspective is entirely useless for getting me through the circumstances of ordinary life in a market-driven culture, but it is very useful in one small, yet important, interesting, and contentious area of contemporary life concerning the development of a field of consciousness studies. An interest in consciousness quickly brings one face to face with questions about the nature of reality. Our only available prospect onto *any* version of reality (including the empirical version) is through conscious processes coordinated to achieve specific models of reality for specific purposes. Our experience of reality is co-

equal to our model-making capabilities, assumptions, purposes, and end-products. Unlike those with more standard experiences and normal psychological perspectives I can comprehend the basic modeling process from inside and out. I experience a seamless world of integrated meanings, beings, and purposes; *and* I experience the backstage cognitive scaffolding that goes into the construction of that seamless world. I see the process of world-modeling from the user's perspective (from within a successfully integrated world of substances and meanings) and I see it from the contractor's angle (in its incremental reconstruction from distinct components, from distinct incrementally-modified uses of awareness and intention). The transformational experience between *no-world* and *world* exposes the world-modeling and meaning-making processes and allows me the formation of a pragmatic analysis of conscious processes.

Because I am able to see myself modeling the world for particular uses I cannot hold the common naïve assumptions that many others do about the absolute truths of any of the conceptual elements used in composing a functional world-model. Due to conscious first-hand experience of the backstage cognitive phases that lead up to and inform empirical assumptions, I do not and cannot assume the precepts of the scientific endeavor to be either absolute or of a fundamental nature. Similarly, due to a fully conscious awareness of the backstage cognitive phases that precede and lead directly to the spiritual impulse toward projected meaningfulness and specialness, I do not and cannot assume that religious explanatory parameters are absolute or of a fundamental nature either. I see the back-stage processes which lead me to the pragmatic use of empirical and religious assumptions, I see the extraordinary value of these assumptions in modeling a functional world, but even in my most indulgent summer surrender to the beauty of the world they create I do not and cannot regard their precepts as absolute truths in the way that most others do. (And it is not for lack of trying.)

Moreover, I can see quite clearly how the empirical and spiritual explanatory assumptions would only confuse one's analysis of consciousness when empirical and spiritual precepts are *mistaken* as absolute truths. It is clearly advantageous for creatures like us to convert empirical and spiritual assumptions into absolute truths in the mind, to invest in them in the fullest and simplest way possible. This *absolute conversion* (the investment in assumptions as if they were absolute truths rather than pragmatic, contingent, made-up truths) is a way of making the world-modeling process automatic, subconscious, intuitive, seamless, transparent, and cognitively economical. By investing in precepts as absolute truths the assumptions work on their own, supported and reified by subconscious, habitual, life-appropriate behaviors. While the empirical and spiritual impulses arise to maximize biological and sociological survival, and while the assumptions behind them are life-appropriate (and therefore *good* assumptions on both our personal and communal

value-scales), they are not intended or designed as the analytical means to discern the truth of our actual condition or to illuminate the backstage cognitive processes, the conceptual scaffolding, the dynamics of meanings and purposes, behind all conscious and subconscious acts of world-modeling.

Our natural desire for a rational-empirical and intuitively-spiritual solution to the conundrums of consciousness compels us as a culture to project the empirical and spiritual avenues of analysis onto a realm of phenomena that fall far beyond the explanatory scope, purpose, and capabilities of empiricism and spiritual precepts. I understand the impulse to employ these two ideologies but I see the futility. Empirical and spiritual precepts are certainly useful as operational assumptions within the living world, providing advantageous causal-physical mastery of environmental circumstances, and providing an extremely advantageous existential *over*-valuation of the importance of our individual lives, our cultures, and our species – science and religion unquestionably provided us the control and confidence we needed to rise as a species and to comfortably exist as individuals. But they are not in the least bit useful in descriptions of our cognitive characteristics and dynamics. And like it or not, the cognitive dimension must now be included in any viable rendition of reality. Our fear of inevitable disappointment in our absolute expectations (the expectation of absolute empirical and spiritual truths) makes it all the more difficult to question the personal and cultural beliefs which forestall the development of a field of consciousness studies.

The discomfiting letting-go of absolutes, and the effect of this letting-go on the communal psyche, must be explored with honesty and clarity (and must be reinterpreted with more accurate and humane psychotherapeutic assumptions) if we are to move forward in our self-knowledge as a species, as a culture, as individuals, and particularly as an emerging field of consciousness studies. To understand the fundamental purpose, substance, and application of conscious processes in nature and in ourselves we must come to see ourselves as making models of the world that by their very nature are fungible, contingent, and artificial (non-absolute). And unlike in empirical explorations where *subjectivity* is the antithesis of objective truth, in consciousness studies we are obliged to embrace the fact that cognitive characteristics arise for no other reason (and in no other format) than to provide an autonomous entity with a *subjective* orientation in a specific socio-environmental configuration-space. To empirically eliminate subjective perspectives in consciousness studies is to eliminate the basis, the purpose, the dynamics, the format, the experiential domain, and the experiential product of what it is we purport to be studying.

This subjectivity vs. objectivity conundrum (which reduces to the mind/body problem in philosophy) seems formidable to many but is actually wonderful news. The culture's

energetic new imperative to understand our conscious condition compels us to finally acknowledge and validate our cognitive, psychological, emotional, intuitional, intellectual, interrelative, inter-accommodative characteristics which are inherent to the inescapably entwined relationship between subject and object. We are now obliged to set terms and values for these relational characteristics and dynamics wherever they occur, rather than over-valuing mere causal forces and material substances. We are also obliged to honor and utilize cognitive and psychological variation, rather than invalidating unique perspectives by empirical consensus. And we are obliged to celebrate the meanings, associations, concepts, and relationships we individually and communally create through our varied cognitive and psychological characteristics and points of view. Throughout the course of the empirical project these vital and compelling aspects of individual and communal experiential reality (arguably our profoundest resources) have been proactively invalidated, treated as unreal, and therefore grossly undervalued.

I support and commend JCER's efforts to engage analyses of our conscious condition through a variety of unique vantage-points. A view into our conscious condition is best explored employing non-standard perspectives since these shed the most light on our otherwise invisible *normal* world-modeling processes. Until very recently I had never shared my condition and my experience of it with anyone outside a clinical setting. There has not been a proper forum for it. I hope this very personal revelation of mind-state transformations will inspire and encourage others to share the private configuration and analytical uses of their own unique inner landscape. I thank the visionary editorship of JCER for conceiving a format that combines highly personal transformational insights with consciousness-studies-appropriate interpretations (very clever!), and I am especially thankful to Greg Nixon for providing a safe, supportive haven for such valuable and meaningful explorations.