

The Light of Consciousness:
An Inquiry into the Observations of Peter Russell

Madeleine Howenstine
California Institute of Integral Studies

PARP 6545

Summer 2011

The Light of Consciousness:
An Inquiry into the Observations of Peter Russell

In his book, *From Science to God*, Peter Russell, an author and thinker with a background in both physics and meditation, reflects on the similarities between our experience of consciousness and our experience and observations of the qualities of light.¹ Examining the correspondences between these two phenomena, he speculates as to whether this points to a deeper, underlying foundation of reality. This paper briefly explores Russell's observations and also the question of whether this is simply a metaphor and, if so, is it an accurate and useful one. Or, as Russell speculates, is there a fundamental resonance that is revealed in this comparison that says something important about the nature of reality?

We have learned through the explorations of the theories of relativity and the theories of quantum mechanics that light seems to hold a unique role in the cosmos. It has no mass. It behaves as a wave (though it appears to need no medium to travel through as it is capable of traversing a vacuum) and also as a particle that is able to influence that with which it interacts. We observe light to travel at a set speed (186,282 miles per second) no matter from what frame of reference it is being observed. Whether we are traveling towards light or away from it, its speed is measured to be the same—the speed does not change relative to our frame of reference or our velocity. The double slit experiment makes it clear that light exhibits qualities of both a particle and a wave

¹ Russell, P. (2002)

depending on how we observe it and black box radiation shows how it acts in discreet quanta rather than as a continuum.

When we explore more deeply what the cosmos is like from the point of view of light we find that light experiences neither time nor space. While we observe it to travel at a very precise speed from any frame of reference, as Peter Russell states : “from light’s own point of view it travels no distance and takes zero time to do so.”² He goes on to say “This points to something very strange indeed about light. Whatever light is, it seems to exist in a realm where there is no before and no after. There is only *now*.”³ Light appears to have no mass, experience no time, and not travel through space even though we perceive it as traveling at a specific rate of speed. It seems to be non-local and outside of time in some way.

In examining our experience of consciousness, Russell makes note of the fact that almost all philosophical and religious traditions refer to consciousness and awareness with the metaphor of light. In a quote from *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, he notes consciousness is described as “the self-originated Clear Light, eternally unborn...shining forth within one’s own mind.”⁴ We speak of the great sages and saints as being ‘illuminated’ or ‘enlightened.’ Often, when other beings are experienced in altered states of consciousness they are perceived of as beings of light and we experience and interact with the ‘light’ of their consciousness. When we are

² Russell, P. (2002) p. 64

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. p. 70

in the presence of death, when a being no longer contains a living consciousness we have the experience of a light going out. The imagery of light is very closely linked to our experience of awareness, of consciousness.

As we examine consciousness more closely we also note that it does not seem to have mass. Though conscious awareness seems to be strongly correlated with our brains, the anecdotal evidence from out-of-body experiences and near death experiences raise the question of whether it is also a nonlocal phenomenon. In these experiences, people report seeing events from perspectives (frames of reference?) other than the location of their physical body. Conscious awareness does not appear to be confined to the physical mass of the brain.

Our sense that our awareness is centered in our heads is caused by it being the location of the major sense organs. The eyes and ears receive the input from that location creating a sense of that is where 'we' are. Experiments where subjects are fed visual information, via cameras and headsets, from a location behind and looking at their physical body create the sensation of the 'I' being in the location of the cameras and not the location of the physical body.⁵

In states of deep meditation we become aware not only of the non-local quality of consciousness but also the quality of being outside of time. When transient thoughts drop away there is only an ever present now. Thoughts provide a frame of reference

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6960612.stm>

that creates the awareness of the passage of time. For the underlying awareness that contains those thoughts, as with photons of light, there is only the now. Everything that we know and experience occurs within our consciousness. Without this ever present awareness we would have no experience, no ability to contemplate the world from different frames of reference. Consciousness is both fundamental, non-local, and without mass.

In observing the correspondences between light and consciousness, Russell notes:

Here again we see close parallels between the light of consciousness and the light of physics. When we considered light from its own frame of reference, we found that distance and time disappeared. The realm of light seems to be somehow beyond space and time. Likewise when we consider the nature of pure consciousness, space and time disappear. In both cases there is only the ever-present moment.

In physics, light turns out to be absolute. Space, time, mass, and energy are not as fixed as we once thought they were. The new absolutes are those of light—the speed of light in a vacuum and the quantum of action in a photon. Similarly, in the realm of mind, the faculty of consciousness is absolute. It is the common ground of all experience—including that of space and time. Consciousness itself, like the light in a projector, is unchanging, eternal.⁶

⁶ Russell, P. (2002) p.84-85.

The similarities between what we know about the behavior of light and our experience of consciousness have led Russell to ask whether there is a fundamental relationship between the two. At a recent talk at IONS Russell observed:

“From light’s point of view there is only the moment—the eternal present moment and what fascinates me about this is you then look at mystical experience and when we get down to, where we start going beyond space, time and matter, when we start going beyond thought, beyond form, so we touch into just the pure light of consciousness, time drops out. It is talked about as a timeless moment, a timeless eternity. And we lose that sense of space and there is no mass.

Consciousness isn’t mass. It doesn’t have a physical material. Light’s point of view of reality seems very close to the mystic’s perception of reality.”⁷

Certainly, light is used as a metaphor for numerous experiences of our consciousness. Light is also perceived to be fundamental to the universe, both in the observations of physics and in most of the world’s religions. In the Bible, Genesis begins with God’s invocation “Let there be light.” Russell notes “These parallels suggest there may be some deeper relationship between the light of physics and consciousness. Could they share a common ground—a common ground that

⁷ Russell, P. IONS April 30, 2011

manifests as the physical realm as light, and in the realm of mind as the light of consciousness that shines in every being?”⁸

The similarities between light and consciousness allow light to be a useful metaphor for our sense of consciousness. The great spiritual traditions use the terms light, illumined, enlightened to indicate awareness and consciousness. Our own experience of the sense of a light going out in the presence of death reinforces this strong association. Simply the fact that these associations between light and consciousness permeate our world, our religions, our philosophy and our own experience reinforce the idea that perhaps there is a deeper relationship. Both light and consciousness are fundamental to our existence. There is much that we don't understand about the workings of either. They at once are foundational and also, in a sense, other—mysterious in their timelessness, non-locality, and lack of mass while ever present.

Light is an effective metaphor for consciousness. The use of the term light gives the sense of illumination that we experience with consciousness. The strong parallels between the qualities of light—those of no mass, no time, no space—and the similar qualities of pure consciousness encourage one to keep an open mind as to whether there is a deeper association between light and consciousness. Could they, as Russell speculates, each be expressions of a deeper reality? Perhaps our continuing explorations into physics, quantum theory, and the nature of mind will illuminate and answer to this question one day.

⁸ Ibid. p. 85-86

References

Russell, Peter (2002). *From Science to God*. Novato, CA: New World Library

Electronic:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6960612.stm> accessed 6.15.11