

A New Enlightenment?

Bill Alcorn

The Philosophical Club of Cleveland, November 14, 2006

I'll start with two readings.

Akasha is a Sanskrit word meaning "ether": all-pervasive space. Originally signifying "radiation" or "brilliance" in Indian philosophy, akasha was considered the first and most fundamental of the five elements -- the others being air, fire, water, and earth. Akasha embraces the properties of all five elements; it is the womb from which everything we perceive with our senses has emerged and into which everything will ultimately re-descend. The Akashic Record is the enduring record of all that happens, and has ever happened, in space and time.

- Ervin Laszlo, *"Science and the Akashic Field,"* 2004.

In 1909 the Harvard University psychologist William James wrote:

We live our lives like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom... There is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir.

Our "normal" consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connection. Not only psychic research, but metaphysical philosophy and speculative biology are led in their own ways to look with favor on some such "panpsychic" view of the universe as this.

Assuming this common reservoir of consciousness to exist, this bank upon which we all draw...the question is, What is its own structure? What is its inner topography?...Are there subtler forms of matter which upon occasion may enter into functional connection with the individuations in the psychic sea, and then, and then only, show themselves? -- so that our ordinary human experience, on its material as well as on its mental side, would appear to be only an extract from the larger psychophysical world?

- from Dean Radin, *"Entangled Minds,"* 2006.

Susan and I recently enjoyed a short and busy tour of England and Scotland, my first trip there. One of my favorite experiences was spending an hour or so in the "Enlightenment" Room at the British Museum in London. Here, collected in walls of leather-bound books and glass-enclosed display cases, are ideas and evidence assembled by British explorers, philosophers, archaeologists, and natural scientists of the late 17th and 18th centuries. This is now known as the Age of Enlightenment, a time when our collective understanding of the world went through a major change.

Virtually all the contributors were men, amateurs in the best sense of that word. Two big changes from then to now are the contributions of women and the development of professional credentials for exploration. Women double the field of explorers. The credentials requirement tends to limit it.

The Enlightenment had a strong influence on our country's founders. One strand of that influence was the departure of thinking from the dictates of established religions, particularly in natural philosophy, later called science. Another was the emergence of new political and social theory. We may marvel at that small group of American colonists piecing together a democratic republic with European societies as their only precedent. It was Enlightenment thinking that guided them. Our Founding Fathers were also amateurs in the same sense as the British explorers. They did not hire professional consultants to guide them; there weren't any.

The Enlightenment Room illustrates an important change in science (or natural philosophy). Until the early 18th century, the recognized way to learn about the world was to collect, study, and categorize specimens of interest. For example, there is a display of footwear from around the globe, collected to provide insight about anthropological variations. There is an excellent collection of natural rocks, polished to show the inner layers. Geology was still taught in the 20th century by studying such collections. One significant 18th century change was the development of new instruments with which to observe and measure the natural world: microscopes, telescopes, precision scales, etc. King George III, of all people, strongly promoted this new way to do science, and his personal collection is in the Enlightenment Room. We may think of him as the fool who lost the colonies and ended up a crazy man, but apparently there was another side to him.

The Enlightenment was far from everybody's cup of tea in the 18th century, and it still meets resistance in many quarters of the world, including our own. Old ways of thinking have a tenacious hold on us, partly because of familiarity, partly because many authoritative establishments have been built around them, and partly because they nearly always carry a germ of truth. Yet we've had a spectacular run of about 300 years starting with Enlightenment thinking.

I believe we are in the early stages of a new Enlightenment that will change the way we understand the world -- again, in a major way. Perhaps it dates back nearly 100 years to William James's prophetic remarks that I read earlier. It is growing out of a field often called consciousness studies, and is populated with scientists, philosophers, psychologists, theologians, and many other 20th century disciplines. But overall, it is still an amateur pursuit of men and women transcending the boundaries of their training. This is surely a strength, just as it was 300 years ago.

The starting point is the growing realization that human consciousness is not merely a product of our brains but a much larger phenomenon. Brains, of course, are wonderful processors of information. They sort out sensory input at incredible speeds and allow us to function in the everyday world. But there are many things brains can not do, even with a good set of sense organs and an accurate memory bank. This is the domain of the mind, and of consciousness.

I've been following consciousness studies for 15 years or so. One focus is the field of psychic phenomena -- such things as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis. We now have available careful, statistical analyses of thousands of controlled experiments in such fields, not just with humans. The analyses are detailed in a recent book by Dean Radin. He clearly shows that psychic events are real, yet still puzzling. An identical twin really can sense when the other is in trouble. Dogs really can sense when their masters start home, even hundreds of miles away. Plants really can react to intentions of their owners. Big world events such as 9/11 really do coincide with upsets in remote random number generators. None of these things always happen. But they do happen enough to be statistically sound.

Theory. How do these connections occur? Is there a scientific explanation? The answer may be in some new theories and data emerging in the last ten years. Let's start with theory. I like the proposal of the systems theorist, Ervin Laszlo, that there is a universal information field to which we all have access, probably through what we call our subconscious. Animals and possibly inanimate things may also be connected to the same field. Laszlo calls it the A-field, in deference to the ancient idea of an Akashic field. He proposes that this concept may provide insight into many current scientific puzzles, not only in consciousness, but also in areas as wide ranging as cosmology, biology, anthropology, and quantum physics.

The proposed A-field is real, in the physical or energetic sense, but it can not be measured scientifically, at least not yet. This information field carries the memory of everything that is, or was. It carries templates or blueprints for all organisms and things, from living organisms to planets, to galaxies and beyond.

A field of this type was known as the Akashic Record by Eastern mystics. Somewhat related concepts are known as the quantum vacuum or the zero-point field by physicists.

We are all familiar with a few fields identified in the scientific era. The gravitational field and electromagnetic fields are well known, but who has seen them or even measured them? What we measure are their effects, and that's why we easily accept them. Let's take a brief look at some of the effects that could be explained by the A-field. Some scientific puzzles.

Cosmology and the beginning of the universe. The present standard model is that our universe started with a big bang about 14 billion years ago. Measurements such as far-distant radiation and the movement of galaxies support this description. But the more we look, the more puzzling are certain aspects of the story. The biggest puzzle, perhaps, is the amazing coherence of the universe. How did the handful of physical constants evolve that have allowed 14 billion years of existence without disintegration, not to mention conditions that support life on earth and probably other planets? The probabilities of this happening are infinitesimal if the whole process occurred in a random way.

However, if our universe was born in a pre-big-bang milieu that provided guidance through informational templates from other universes, the picture changes. The big bang had references to go on. Thus we need to consider the concept of a metaverse that preceded our universe.

Biology. Biology is full of puzzles. How the parts of living organisms seem to cooperate instantly and coherently, with each other and with their environment. How the various parts develop from identical DNA into very different organs. How individual organisms cooperate with others in their species with no apparent communication. And the puzzle of evolution. Do species really mutate in response to purely random environmental effects? Or is there a pattern of development? Perhaps we can take that one up another time.

I'll mention one model that touches on some of these questions. It's a field theory that is consistent with the idea of the A-field. Specifically, the morphic fields that the biologist, Rupert Sheldrake, cites in discussing the development and behavior of plants and animals. He believes there is some kind of bond among similar organisms that not only provides a means of intuitive inter-communication such as within flocks of birds, but also acts as a template in the development of new members. That is, an oak tree grows from an acorn in the way other oak trees have grown by reference to a morphic or morphogenetic field of oak trees.

Human beings are not exempt from biology. There's a field theory that is much better known to many of you than Sheldrake's concept. That is the idea associated with Carl Jung that there is a collective unconscious that bonds groups of humans. The templates in this field include such things as archetypal figures.

Cultural anthropology. Let's go far afield for a moment and take note of the finding of

anthropologists that human cultures seemed to develop in different parts of the planet with strikingly similar methods and objects. A lot of effort has gone into trying to find how indigenous people on different continents managed to make similar pottery or build similar pyramids. Maybe the answer is that they responded to similar information in a universal field. If birds and oak trees can do it, why not human beings?

Quantum Physics. Quantum theory was developed through some remarkable insights in response to the observation that small quantities of light sometimes act like particles and sometimes like waves. As theory and experimental confirmation progressed through the 20th century, the bedrock assumptions of classical physics began to crumble, at least at the subatomic level. Things like the reality of objects, causality, and determinism.

One of the last assumptions to go was the idea of locality. This means that one thing can influence another only in proximity to it, including signals such as radio waves. In 1964, John Bell, an Irish physicist, postulated that entities at any distance, if once connected, could still influence each other. This was experimentally confirmed for photons in 1972, and many times since then for various small particles. That is, the complementary particles are forever entangled, no matter how far from each other they travel. Locality is no longer an easy assumption. Something unaccounted for is connecting otherwise isolated objects. Entanglement.

Inevitably, some have speculated that quantum principles, and in particular, the idea of entanglement, have broader application. One provocative idea is that everything in our universe was connected at one time, before the big bang, so everything is somehow entangled forever. Everything. An even more provocative idea I mentioned under cosmology -- that the universal information field may have existed before our big bang.

Consciousness. Consciousness is being studied in many disciplines. The thorny part for most scientists is the growing evidence for psychic phenomena, or the greek letter Psi for short.

Psi is still taboo as an acceptable academic subject. Fewer than 1% of universities worldwide have any faculty with a public interest in Psi research. Why? Simply because it is not safe, career-wise. It implies that our well-accepted model of reality is deficient. Professional skeptics ridicule any such efforts. And the history of psychic phenomena is full of fraud and nonsense. Yet... over 60% of people believe in Psi. The believers are heavily skewed to the better educated. There seems to be no correlation with religious beliefs. Statistically, the most likely Psi believer is female, under 30, well educated, creative, interested in the arts, and left-handed.

60% approval does not make it true, nor an occasional psychic experience, nor the ancient wisdom from sources such as the *Sutras* of Patanjali recorded over 2000 years ago. All these sources deserve respect. However, the solid support for Psi is the body of careful,

controlled experiments carried out around the world over the last 75 years. These are clearly discussed in Dean Radin's book.

So, what is Psi? Any explanation has to deal with information that crosses space and time in ways that defy common sense or classical scientific models. The information interacts with objects at a distance and reaches your mind other than through your normal five senses. In ancient times, Psi was self-evident. In the age of classical science, Psi was impossible, the residue of superstition. Now what?

There have been several theories of Psi. One that was popular in the 20th century, especially in the Soviet Union, involved signals similar to electromagnetic waves. No such mechanism has been discovered. Another group might be called field theories, such as Carl Jung's collective unconsciousness or Rupert Sheldrake's morphic fields. These essentially describe rather than explain Psi effects. There are now a few approaches based on quantum theory. It is a fertile field for theorists, but most physicists still treat Psi as a hot potato while exploring the structure of the cosmos or the subatomic world with enthusiasm.

Entanglement, only recently established as a fact in the quantum physical world, seems to be the phenomenon that can bring Psi into the scientific orbit. Entanglement does not mean that signals such as information waves pass between two minds in telepathy, for instance. It means that the two minds are already entangled because they are already part of a larger quantum system encompassing all of physical reality. This fits right in with the concept of the universal information field, the A-field. We get momentary glimpses of information about other minds, objects, the past or future, not through our senses, but because our unconscious mind is already co-existent with everything else.

Data. I've spent most of my time on a new theory to this point. Is there any hard data supporting this theory? I'm excited by an obscure article published in 1997 that finds a distinct correlation between over 2000 remote viewing trials and the time of day measured in sidereal time. Remote viewing is a disciplined psychic practice of gathering information about a distant place while in a meditative state. It was used by the US military and CIA for a variety of objectives such as finding lost submarines and scanning underground nuclear installations in the Soviet Union in the 1980's. Sidereal time, well known to astronomers, relates local time to the position of certain star clusters rather than to our sun. It is expressed in 24 hour clock time. A sidereal day is about four minutes less than a solar day.

The author, James Spottiswoode, plotted a numerical measure of the results of a series of 1400 remote viewing trials, from different laboratories over a 20 year period, versus the sidereal time of the trial. He found a well-defined peak of effectiveness at 13.5 hours sidereal. He then did the same with another series of 1000 trials and found the same peak. 13.5 hours is the time when certain star clusters are in line with the earth, but nobody would have guessed that such an alignment had anything to do with remote viewing results. Nor have I seen any explanation why one specific alignment should benefit remote

viewing. This seems to be the first time that an environmental factor -- in this case, galactic -
- was related to psychic phenomena by a scientific analysis.

I've never had any interest in astrology. Yet, I must admit that there may be a grain of truth in the ancient notion that the orientation of celestial bodies has something to do with our lives on earth. My take on this finding is that there may be some kind of large field effect, similar to the gravitational field, that does have earthly effects. Putting 2 + 2 together, I wonder if this is a manifestation of Laszlo's universal field -- the A-field. If so, we may expect further evidence to be uncovered in the coming years.

Let me summarize. I've talked about the concept of a universal information field. Such a field would shed light on many puzzling questions in fields as disparate as cosmology, biology, anthropology, quantum physics, and consciousness. The remote viewing correlation strikes me as a solid piece of data analysis that can not be disregarded, although it will be for some time to come. The wheels of science turn very slowly.

Sometime this century, our descendants will likely be as comfortable with the universal information field as we are with the gravitational field. So, I may be jumping the gun a bit, but when Susan asks me where I am going when leaving the house, I just tell her I'm heading into the A-field.

References

Dean Radin, "Entangled Minds", 2006.

Ervin Laszlo, "Science and the Akashic Field", 2004.

S. James P. Spottiswoode, *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, Vol 11, No. 2, 1997. Also available at www.jsasoc.com/docs/JSE-LST.pdf