

Womb = Woman = World: Gender and Transcendence in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism

Author: Laughlin, Charles D, PhD

Publication info: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal 5. 2 (Winter 1990): 147-165.

[ProQuest document link](#)

Abstract: None available.

Full Text: Headnote ABSTRACT: The cosmologies of many cultures use gender as symbolic for polar attributes of human consciousness. The author presents a developmental neurobiological theory to account for the non-arbitrary way in which this attribution comes about, and applies the theory to an explanation of the symbolic use of gender in Tibetan tantric Buddhism. He concludes by discussing the implications of the theory for understanding the effects of positive and negative pre- and perinatal experiences upon the development of gender identity. Once I too sought expression; now I know my gods concede me only allusion or mention of a thing. Jorge Luis Borges (1961). INTRODUCTION The cosmologies and belief systems of many cultures use gender to label components of consciousness.¹ Many peoples believe, for example, that the ground of consciousness in both males and females is fundamentally feminine. This paper presents a biogenetic structural² theory explaining the relationship between early experience in the child and gender symbolism found in Tibetan cosmology and tantric meditation. The theory integrates data drawn from the neurosciences and cross-cultural research, as well as the author's direct experience as a practitioner of Tibetan tantrism.³ The theory will first be summarized and then will be discussed in depth emphasizing pre-and perinatal perception and Tibetan meditation.⁴ The paper will conclude with some implications of the theory for personality and gender identity. THE THEORY The theory is simple and straightforward. We hypothesize that there exists in most cultures a causal relationship in development between pre- and peri-natal experience in the child and the non-arbitrary symbolic use of gender to label components of adult consciousness. Most cosmologies in some way make a fundamental distinction between those constituents of experience or reality that are considered male and those that are considered female (Neumann 1963, Eliade 1958, 1964). For example, one often hears of the "male" and "female principles" among consciousness-raising circles in our own culture. One also hears of yin (female) and yang (male) with reference to Chinese cosmology. In studying cosmology cross-culturally, the anthropologist is struck by the fact that the use of gender as symbolic of components of mind, experience or reality is regular and patterned. Rather than assigning gender arbitrarily to domains of consciousness, assignment seems to be lawful and regular cross-culturally. The non-arbitrariness of gender attribution in cosmologies derives, we will argue, from a series of universal cognitive associations that occur during pre- and peri-natal neurocognitive development. The initial association by the child is between its totality of perceptual experience while in utero ("womb") with the maternal figure with whom he/she bonds, usually the one from whose uterus he/she emerges ("woman"). There is evidence that this bonding occurs before birth, that the child recognizes (note the advised use of the term re-cognizes) its mother if a birth is natural and relatively humane (see Chamberlain 1983:17 for relevant sources; see also Brazelton and Als 1979; Liedloff 1975). It even makes sense that the essence of mother-infant bonding is precisely this equation of the lifeworld (what is termed the lebenswelt for many phenomenologists; see Schutz and Luckmann 1973) of the pre-natal child with the mother. Thus, when mother becomes a differentiated object, conceptually distinct from all other subjects in a heretofore conceptually undifferentiated totality of unfolding experience, then mother becomes a symbol associated with memories of the entire pre- and peri-natal lifeworld. Mother is now the one form in the world that stands for the entire world of immediate experience, and, as psychoanalytic theory has held for nearly a century, mother also becomes the first and quintessential "woman." Thus the process of development during pre- and peri-natal life naturally produces the fundamental cognitive formula: womb = woman = world. Gradually the child explores its postuterine world, a world that begins as an undifferentiated energy field simultaneously arising and passing

away in consciousness, and that later begins to be cognitively fragmented into conceptually distinct objects. Still, a primacy of perception over cognitive differentiation (see Merleau-Ponty 1964) dominates the child's experience. Cognitive development emerges within the context (or ground) of an ongoing, continuous, unfolding perceptual experience (Piaget 1977). Perceptual experience (the ground) remains associated with womb = woman = world, and in time becomes both relatively unconscious with the emergence of "higher" cognitive dominance over the perceptual "ground of being" and that part of the world already associated with the feminine. The first social dyad encountered by the child, apart from his/her bonding with mother, is usually that between male and female parental figures representing as they do the primary gender role models.⁵ And as many anthropologists have shown, the basic orientation of the child vis-à-vis his/her society derives initially from role interactions in the family. At the same time as awareness of the mother/father dyad is growing, the more advanced neurocognitive functions mediated by such structures as the prefrontal lobes, inferior parietal lobe and secondary association areas, are gradually emerging. Cognitions mediated by these structures develop either in complementarity with, or in opposition to, the world of immediate experience (womb = woman = world) and become associated with "father," and by extrapolation with "male." The equation of male with the knowledge derived during conceptual development may be theoretically conceived as occurring due to recognition of simple intransitivity (lifeworld = mother, mother ≠ father, father = cogito) in a Piagetian (1980:84) frame, or due to the simple logic of metaphoric and metonymic relations (lifeworld: mother::cogito:father) in a Levi-Straussian (1968) frame. In any event, differentiation of objects and discrete events (including "self") in the world is a neurocognitive process primarily in service of adaptation to an ever unfolding-enfolding lifeworld. Hence, from an initial nonarbitrary association of lifeworld with feminine gender, the process by which cognition develops its adaptive structure becomes nonarbitrarily associated with masculine gender, in spite of the enormous cultural variation in details of gender role. The universality of this cognitive process is due to two factors: (1) the brains of all people seem to develop in a very determinate manner during pre- and peri-natal life (see Larroche 1966) and (2) the womb for all people provides a fairly similar environment. However, this is not a simple deterministic model. It is a developmental one which expects to find variance due to environmental and genetic differences. An enormous range of factors are known to influence the development of children in utero (e.g., mother's diet, anoxia, stress, noise, etc.; see Sontag 1941, Schell 1981), and of course treatment of the neonate will vary enormously cross-culturally (e.g., Brazelton, Koslowaki and Tronick, 1977; Liedloff 1975). The best picture we have as yet of pre- and peri-natal life is one of highly structured and preprogrammed development in preparation for adaptation to extrauterine life, but a development program that is nonetheless liable to environmental influences (see Stave 1978). And, of course, development and the influence of socialization, continues after this early period.

The Primacy of Perception The basic axiom of our theory is that the pre- and peri-natal person is conscious, and that the organization of that consciousness is predominantly perceptual (at least by the beginning of the second trimester).⁶ Furthermore, the organization inherent in the neurobiology of intrauterine and neonatal perception (primary sensory networks) becomes a major foundation upon which later cognitive development (secondary association areas, frontal lobes, etc.) occurs. This view is essential to our view precisely because it runs counter not only to much of traditional philosophy and science, but also to a central belief in North American culture: In recent years, it has become abundantly clear that William James' . . . characterization of the world of the infant as a "blooming buzzing confusion" is simply wrong. There is evidence that the infant's world is structured and that far from being overwhelmed by a barrage of stimulation which only slowly comes to be sorted out, the infant from his earliest days is quite properly characterized as competent and organized. It is our contention that one of the major sources for this organization is the infant's limited sensory capacity (Turkewitz and Kenny 1982:362) The bias in western culture tends toward a naive rationalism: In the absence of an effective conceptual order, reality is reduced to a terrifying chaos-an abysmal, seething state in which vast, randomizing, demonic energies threaten to overwhelm the world. The psychology of James (1890) noted above, and to some extent the theology of Tillich

(1963) and the alchemical interpretations of Jung (1955), bear evidence to this claim. Jung, for instance, speaks of the chthonic spirit which he sees as the sexually charged, dark, dangerous and demonic side of God (and of our own psyche). The human condition from this vantage point is one of a terrible tension between the rational ego (culturally associated with light, life, right-handedness and the male principle; Hertz 1909; Needham 1973) and chaos (associated with dark, death, left-handedness and the female principle). The only order is rational and egocentered order. As R.D. Laing (1982) has noted, something like this egocentered view of order lies behind the inability of the Freudians and others to credence the possibility of prenatal consciousness: If the prenatal child has no ego (the argument might run), then how can it be conscious (the very word "conscious" implying some sort of awareness or knowledge, or at least structured experience)? An alternative view, and the one we take, is that all of human experience is intrinsically ordered from the very beginning of development, that pre-rational order is inherent in perception itself. The prerational order is precisely the genetically predisposed organization of the neurosensory apparatus mediating perception. This is a view which is consonant with the psychology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964; but see also Gibson 1969). For Merleau-Ponty, a student of Husserl, the phenomenology of perception is "a philosophy for which the world is always 'already there' before [rational] reflection begins as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon reaching a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status" (1962:vii). The world as presented to consciousness within the sensorium⁷ is already ordered and meaningful (Merleau-Ponty 1962:11). The ordered world is not merely the mapping of memory onto a chaos of sensations (ibid:19). Rather, perception is the very ground of science and knowledge; that is, the primary task of science should be the study of the world-as-given in perception (ibid:47). In modern times we have lost sight of the meaningfulness of pure perception: "we shall no longer hold that perception is incipient science, but conversely that classical science is a form of perception which loses sight of its origins and believes itself complete. The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, . . . to reawaken perception and foil its trick of allowing us to forget it as a fact . . ." (ibid:57). To work one's way back to the arising of pure perception and to dwell in the primacy of its order is to participate in the ongoing creation of the world while in a sort of "pre-personal" form of consciousness (ibid:xi; read pre-egocentered). This is the phenomenologist's "being-in-the-world" and "return to things themselves" (ibid:ix and 80) where there no longer exists a dualism between a prime perceptual order and a secondary objective knowledge. This perceptual world-as-given is the lifeworld (lebenswelt) notion that Edmund Husserl posed as the core theme of phenomenology (see Merleau-Ponty 1962:vii). And it is precisely this lifeworld that we argue predominates in the experience of the pre- and peri-natal person. The Development of the Sensorium

Consciousness is not an object that is absent at one point in development and magically present at another point. Neither is consciousness to be identified as a single quality, such as self-awareness, will or feeling, that sort of "pops up" somewhere later in development. Rather, consciousness is the functional space (or concatenation of factors) within which experience arises and passes away, and the kind of experience will depend upon the stage of maturation of the neurocognitive structures mediating experience. Neural function requires complete networks. It has been long assumed that nervous systems and networks are goal seeking, information processing systems made up of non-goal seeking, non-information processing neurons. This view has come into question (see Klopff 1982:6) as theorists realize that nerve cells are not sort of organic microchips that as static units only begin to function when "wired-up" to networks, but rather are living, functioning, organisms. A more realistic view is that each of the nervous system's 10¹² neurons is a goal seeking unit that developmentally becomes increasingly involved in hierarchy after hierarchy of organization (see Powers 1973). A single neuron may come to accrue 10,000 or more synaptic inputs (Haug 1972). "The overall conclusion is that intelligent brain function can be understood in terms of nested hierarchies of heterostatic goalseeking adaptive loops, beginning at the level of the single neuron and extending upward to the level of the whole brain" (Klopff 1982:13). We are of the view that consciousness is present at an early stage of gestation and that it

develops as a function of the development of its operating neurocognitive structures, particularly those structures mediating the sensorium. The data on just when the various functions arise in prenatal development are often spotty. At any rate, it is clear that the lifeworld of the prenatal child is indeed a rich unfolding of experience at least by the beginning of the second trimester. The lifeworld is rich in color and form, both in waking phases and in dream phases. It is also rich in a full range of auditory frequencies, tactile sensations, somaesthetic sensations of intrinsically initiated movement, and a range of taste sensations (see Barlow and Mollon 1982). It is difficult to obtain direct evidence of attention or "awareness," but if one presumes a relationship between conjugate saccades (rapid focusing eye movements) and attention, this function is operating by at least the 28th week. And if one assumes that some form of awareness is requisite for memory (operating by at least the 25th week), then this would push the beginnings of awareness back much further (e.g., Ploye 1973). In any event, the child is exquisitely sensitive to its environment, and the range of visual, auditory, biochemical, emotional and somaesthetic stimuli that can arise in the sensorium is remarkable (see for example, Ploye 1973; Liley 1972; Schell 1981; Sontag 1941; Fries 1977). The Ordered Lifeworld The development of the nervous system in pre- and peri-natal life is precisely and innately ordered (Larroche 1966). The lifeworld is thus a functional reflection of the emerging structure of the sensorium. If one were to hold that the prenatal child's lifeworld, or perception in the adult for that matter, was some kind of "blooming buzzing confusion," one would have to divorce the experience of perception from the neural structures mediating perception. There exists no stage of development in which the sensorium is in chaos. It is ordered from first to last (e.g., Blakemore 1974 on the visual cortex). Yet this is never a fixed or inflexible order.⁸ Rather, sensorial organization emerges during development mediating an ever ordered, yet ever richer, more flexible, and more complex field of perception. And as the sensorium develops, particularly at the subcortical levels, well before the so-called higher cortical functions, the order inherent in perception is the primary order in human experience. In other words, the primacy of perception holds not only for moment-by-moment cognition, but for ontogenesis as well.⁹

TIBETAN BUDDHISM Gender in Tibetan Cosmology There are a number of versions of Tibetan cosmology possible, as Paul (1982:43ff) so aptly describes (see also Stein 1972). Most versions depict the origin of the cosmos by reference to an absolute undifferentiated realm which somehow becomes differentiated into the primordial paternal (associated with light or brilliance) and the primordial maternal (associated with darkness and torment; Paul 1982:51; see, e.g., Getty 1962:197). Other versions associate the Great Mother of Infinite Space with the absolute realm at the beginning of cosmogony (ibid:52). By way of a series of bifurcations the world is created as an essential polarity with masculine light on the right hand and feminine dark on the left hand (ibid:49). This splitting of cosmogony into masculine and feminine is a pattern familiar to anthropologists and mythologists as being one common among the world's cultures (see e.g., Neumann 1963). The associations between bright masculine and dark feminine, and right and left hand respectively, was noted early in this century by the French sociologist, Robert Hertz (1909). Not surprisingly, the feminine aspect is further associated with womb, which in turn is associated with hell and with death and rebirth (ibid:255). The womb is transformed in myth into a sack or cave in which the hero (masculine) hides while awaiting rebirth (ibid:261, 289), and becomes the grounds for suppression of females who are associated with demons and passion, and are thus dangerous to masculine unity (ibid:272). It should be noted that legendary teachers like Milarepa are often depicted as having spent years dwelling in caves and meditating in cave mouths (Evans-Wintz 1969), a type of solitary meditation actually not allowed any save the most seasoned mediators (author's own research). The cave mouth qua vulva is seen as the only route to rebirth, also a common motif among the world's mythologies (see Campbell 1949:297ff).

Symbolic Penetration The author has spent seven years researching Tibetan meditation practices, including several periods of retreat in Tibetan monasteries in Nepal and elsewhere. This practice has led to the understanding that symbols operate in meditation by a process we have called penetration (Webber and Laughlin 1979; Laughlin, McManus and Webber 1984; Laughlin, McManus and Stephens 1981; and Laughlin, McManus, Rubinstein and Shearer 1985). Penetration can be

modeled analytically as occurring in five stages: outer sign, inner sign, universal (or secret) sign, absorption into universal sign, and absorption into the Transcendental. The outer sign refers to the construction of the image taken as object of meditation. Instructions on precisely how to do this in the Tibetan system are in the text (sadhana), augmented perhaps by the painting (tanka). However, the intent is for the initiate to internalize the image as quickly as possible—that is, be able to meditate upon the inner sign without reference to the text or painting. He/she can now conjure up the image in his/her "mind's eye" without reference to external cues. The initiate meditates upon the inner sign until a corresponding universal sign appears. The universal sign is a spontaneous arising "from the depths" which comes unbidden and may bear little or no logical relationship to the inner sign. The initiate then shifts the focus of attention to the universal sign. If the focus of attention is sufficiently concentrated, absorption (jhana or samadhi) into the universal sign will occur. We will not discuss the Transcendental here as the issue is far too complex. Interested readers are directed to Nishitani (1982).

Gender and Meditation Experiences It is not surprising that intense meditation by either a male or a female meditator upon male and female deities in sexual union leads to experiences and insights pertaining to the masculine and feminine principles operating in consciousness. And given the thesis discussed above, it will also not surprise the reader to hear that experiences associated with the feminine relate to the unfolding of the lifeworld and those associated with the masculine relate to conceptual knowledge about the lifeworld. More specifically one comes to directly experience a dialogue between conscious conceptual knowledge (referred to variously in Sanskrit as *nana*, *vinnana* or *panna*; in Tibetan, *nam*par*shes*pa**) and the unfolding and developing organization of the lifeworld which, when revealed to awareness, becomes intuitive wisdom (in Sanskrit, *prajna*; in Tibetan, *shes'rab**).¹ The emphasis in Buddhist insight meditation is upon the process of gradual merger of these two orders or forms of knowledge into a unitary unfolding knowing. The culmination of this union is seen as an undifferentiated knowing which is the lifeworld knowing itself as it really is. It is becoming recognized that people often re-experience their womb lives and births under hypnotic regression (Chamberlain 1980, 1983) and primal therapy (Janov 1972), and under the influence of psychoactive drugs (Grof 1979). It has not yet been generally recognized that the experience of womb and birth scenes spontaneously arise during meditation, particularly when the meditation is carried out in an intense retreat situation. The author recalls once meditating on the breath (*anapanasati*) in a straightback chair when a tunnel arose in the visual field at the end of which was a light which grew brighter and more intense (accompanied by a growing flow of energy in his body). When the climax of the experience had passed, he found himself lying on the floor in fetal position with arms and legs twitching and in a state of confusion as to how he had gotten there. This particular meditation (breath, or (*anapanasati*)) is well known among advanced meditators to be associated with hypermnesia, the capacity to remember in extraordinary detail, a phenomenon which also arises in the course of hypnotherapy (Chamberlain 1983:29). Tibetan adepts have commonly reported recalling not only birth in this lifetime, but also births in previous lifetimes. And the Tibetan doctrine of reincarnation is intimately associated with womb and birth symbolism (see Evans-Wintz 1960:179). In fact, anthropologists have learned that birth and death are commonly related among the world's cultures, as is womb-birth symbolism related to the quest for spiritual power (see e.g. Eliade 1958, 1964; Harner 1980:32ff). So much can be said for our own cultural traditions as well (see Neumann 1963:43ff on myth and Silber 1971:133 on the alchemical tradition).

SUMMARY The lifeworld with its inherent, lawful unfolding order (Greek, *physis*; Skt., *prajna*), predominates in pre- and perinatal consciousness. The lifeworld becomes cognitively associated with the feminine and later with feminine aspects of consciousness (or the world as portrayed in consciousness). Conceptual knowledge (Greek, *logos*; Sanskrit, *panna*) which has developed in adaptation to the lifeworld becomes associated with the masculine through complementarity with, or opposition to, the feminine. This is a process that is universal to all people in all cultures. Finally, meditation upon masculine and feminine forms in Tibetan tantric practice penetrates to this fundamental cognitive bifurcation, activates the polarity, and may ultimately bring about the experience of reunion between lifeworld and knowledge.

IMPLICATIONS We would like to briefly point out two

implications of the womb = woman = world theory for future consideration and research: (1) the interactive relationship of negative pre- and perinatal experience and developing cognition, and the importance of this relationship to an understanding of (2) gender identity. Negative Womb-Positive Womb The entire mechanism of gestation and perinatal mother-infant bonding is biologically designed to provide the most favorable circumstances for early ontogenesis. Even so, the intrauterine and early postuterine environments are anything but impervious to stressful intrusion (Schell 1981; Sontag 1941; deMause 1981; Stone 1973; Bekoff and Fox 1972; Fries 1977; Liley 1972; Ploye 1973). In fact, the pre- and perinatal child may be stressed to the point of distress (a la Selye 1956; or even death, Verny 1981), and such trauma can mark the entire course of postnatal development (see reviews in deMause 1981; Verny 1982; Chamberlain 1983; Fries 1977). We would particularly point to the influence of pre- and perinatal experiences on the establishment (or "tuning") of a characteristic balance of autonomic functions (see Gellhorn 1967). The data on intrauterine autonomic tuning for humans are spotty at best (Richmond and Lustman 1955; Wenger 1941), but much more suggestive data are available for non-human subjects (Hofer 1974). We suggest that a range of autonomic balance vis-a-vis the lifeworld is established in utero, during birth and in early infancy, and that responses based upon this range will vary with the individual (see Richmond and Lustman 1955; Grossman and Greenberg in Stone et al 1973), and between cultures (Brazelton, Koslowski and Tronick 1977; Liedloff 1975). We disagree with deMause's (1981) contention that the prenatal lifeworld is inevitably stressful and that the pre- and perinatal child is always ambivalent in its response to the lifeworld. Rather, we agree with Stave (1978:29) and Liedloff (1975) that a naturally nurturant pre- and perinatal environment, including natural mother-infant bonding, results in a positive adaptation on the part of the child. In other words, the child will have an initially positive orientation to its lifeworld. The child is innately prepared to be born and to bond with (imprint upon) its mother (Sugarman 1977). This translates into a largely positive response to the (often rapid) changes in the lifeworld and a preparedness to cognitively identify lifeworld with mother-thus the first part of our womb = woman = world equation. However, if the lifeworld includes a persistent pattern of stress from phenomena such as anoxia, stress-related hormones from the mother, failure of nurturance, failure of bonding, insensitive actions on the part of physicians and staff, and the like (see Verny 1981), then the child's orientation to its lifeworld may well be ambivalent, or even largely negative. We suggest that the range of initial orientation to the lifeworld from positive through ambivalent to negative will influence the developing relationship between lifeworld (feminine principle) and cognition (masculine principle). Simplifying somewhat, positive pre- and perinatal orientation will lead to developing complementarity between lifeworld and cognition, while ambivalent to negative orientation will lead to some degree of opposition between lifeworld and cognition. In other words, positive orientation toward womb = woman = world will result in cognition (associated with masculine) becoming defined in complementarity to, and not in opposition to, the lifeworld. On the other hand, negative orientation will result in cognition becoming defined in opposition to, and not complementarity to, the lifeworld. A complementary relationship between lifeworld and cognition is marked by fluidity and equality of interaction between events and cognitions, a sense of connectedness of everything, a non-threat response to lifeworld changes, and little sense of duality or distinction between knowledge and event, self and other. An oppositional relationship on the other hand, is marked by struggle to conceptually fix, rigidify, or stabilize interaction between events in the lifeworld and cognitions, a sense of distance, alienation, isolation and inequality between events and cognition, a chronic sense of danger and threat and attendant anxiety about events and an emphasis upon controlling or dominating events. The Problem of Gender We further suggest that there exists a relationship between positive and negative lifeworld orientation on the one hand and the nature of gender identification on the other hand. This is because although the consciousness of each individual includes (feminine) lifeworld and (masculine) cognitive functions, each individual belongs to a single gender. Individuals must come to identify with either the gender associated with the lifeworld (i.e., female) or the gender associated with cognition (i.e., male).¹¹ We would expect to find (all else being equal) few difficulties arising in the process of gender identity among individuals or

groups experiencing thoroughly positive lifeworld orientation. Both males and females identify with essentially positive categories, and the relationships between the genders is defined upon the principle of complementarity. Complementarity means that the two genders are not entirely defined upon sets of mutually exclusive qualities, but are seen to hold many qualities in common, and exclusive qualities where they are defined are seen as merely binary aspects of the same thing. In other words, we are persons first and foremost and genders second. Difficulties arise for individuals and groups experiencing ambivalent to negative orientation to lifeworld, for half the population (females) are required to identify with the negatively evaluated lifeworld (i.e., womb = woman = world) and the other half (males) are required to identify with cognition defined in opposition to negatively evaluated lifeworld. Oppositionally defined gender means that each gender is coded as a set of mutually exclusive qualities, and there is conceived to be little or no overlap between the sets: e.g., "boys are tough and girls are soft," etc. Thus in a society such as our own where pre- and perinatal lifeworld events have been for many people routinely stressful, we would expect to find among many women: (1) ambivalent feelings towards one's own gender; (2) ambivalence towards pregnancy, birth and motherhood; (3) frequent failure of confidence in independent coping with lifeworld events; (4) a tendency toward masochism and subordination; (5) and weak female-female bonding. Among many men we would expect to find: (1) ambivalent to negative feelings towards females, leading to attraction-avoidance binds; (2) minimal or no involvement with pregnancy, birth and postnatal care, (3) failure of empathy towards infants; (4) strong male-male bonding; (5) notable emphasis upon control and dominance over females in sexual and non-sexual interaction; (6) and a tendency towards sexual aggression and violence.¹² We are explicitly pointing to an interactive, developmental model linking culturally patterned pre- and peri-natal lifeworld events with adult cultural patterns such as type of economy and political structure, sexual division of labor and deviance.

References

REFERENCE NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in Chicago, November, 1983. We owe much to the ideas and suggestions, as well as editorial corrections, offered by John McManus, Peter Hertz, Shawn MacPherson, Steve Richer, Myra Mossman, Shelley Chubby, Karen Friedl, John Cove, Sheila Richardson, Iain Prattis, Elizabeth Allgeier, Radhika Sekar and Sheila Evans. A special acknowledgement must go to Michael Ling who did much of the library research for us and contributed to many discussions. However, none of these folks should be held responsible for our peculiar views.
2. The perspective taken here is that of biogenetic structuralism (Laughlin and d'Aquili 1974; d'Aquili et al 1979). Biogenetic structuralism is an interdisciplinary approach that is grounded in evolutionary biology and the neurosciences, and that has tried wherever possible to integrate data derived from direct experience into models of neurocognitive process (see Laughlin, McManus and Shearer 1984). Our group is interested in how symbolism operates in the neurocognitive mediation of religious experience (Laughlin et al 1979, 1981; Laughlin and Stephens 1980; d'Aquili 1982, Webber et al 1983. The perspective most closely allied to our own are those of Pribram (1971,1977), Globus (1976), Piaget (1971,1977,1980), Crook (1980), and Count (1973).
3. In attempting always to integrate neurocognitive with cross-cultural behavioral and phenomenological data toward a solution to any particular problem, we have become sensitized to expect some form of direct, firsthand experience underlying even seemingly bizarre tales, myths, legends, ceremonials, mystical dramas and "superstitions." We feel that the human sciences must now come to credence the possibility that direct experiences are the source of cross-cultural symbolic material, as was suggested by Thompson (1935:201-202) for claims of psychic powers for saints in the middle ages, and as has been shown by Hufford (1982) for the so-called Old Hag phenomenon and by Greeley (1975) for a variety of psychic occurrences including *deja vu*, clairvoyance and contact with the dead.
4. Among the polemics encountered during this study were: free choice vs. right to life; Freud vs. Rank (is birth recall memory or mere fantasy?); the primacy of perception vs. the primacy of cognition in experience; clinical data vs. pure research (the usual applied vs. pure science squabble); "split-brain" vs. "working brain" models of neural asymmetry; nature vs. nurture (or nature vs. culture); gender as symbol vs. gender as role; mind and brain different vs. mind-brain identity. In order to bear in on the essence

of the central thesis, we will sidestep most of these weighty issues where they do not directly bear on the thesis. However, to avoid possible misunderstanding, the views forming a background to our theory may be presumed from the following caveats: a) Consciousness begins at or near conception. This is contrary to the dominant belief in North American culture that life and consciousness begin respectively at and after birth. The evidence in favor of pre- and peri-natal consciousness seems to be overwhelming and growing rapidly (see reviews by Verny 1982; deMause 1981; Chamberlain 1983; Stone et al 1973; Kessen et al 1970). The interesting questions center on the nature of consciousness and its constituent functions at the various stages of pre- and peri-natal development. b) Consciousness does not equal response. The presence of behavior is not requisite for the presence of consciousness, or any of the other constituents of consciousness; i.e. attention, sensation, feeling, cognition, memory, etc. Requiring response as evidence of consciousness is a long-standing error in the human sciences, influencing even sophisticated researchers such as Piaget (see Gruber and Voneche 1977:Part V). It has reached the point in research with prenatal children and with animals where it is reasonable to presume consciousness until proven otherwise, rather than presume lack of consciousness. c) Birth recall may be, and often is, veridical memory and not merely fantasy. A number of researchers have verified birth memory reports using a variety of methods (see Raikov 1980, 1982; Cheek 1974; Chamberlain 1980, 1982, see Chamberlain 1983 for review). d) Interdisciplinary study is the key to understanding complex issues. In keeping with the views of Sherif (1977) on the social sciences, and more recently of Kirk (1983) on the study of neurocognitive processes, the trend in science is away from highly specialized treatments of complex subjects, and toward interdisciplinary collaboration. This pooling of information and insight must incorporate both the so-called pure and applied (clinical) approaches. e) Nature vs. nurture is a false dichotomy. There is in reality no separation of nature and culture. As we will come to see, the conceptual opposition of these two aspects in the thinking of people is due largely to psychodynamic factors and not an accurate scientific description of experience. f) "Mind" and "brain" are two ways of viewing the same process. "Brain" refers to the physiological-structural attributes of "mind," and "mind" refers to the ways "brain" experiences its own functions. To posit mind-brain dualism is yet one more false dichotomy. Mind you, this is not a simplistic reductionist or identity view in which brain may be treated as mind, or mind as brain. Rather it is a structural monist view in which mind and brain are treated as different windows for watching the same process-and the more windows the better. 5. Anthropologists recognize that cross-culturally the male parental figure is not always the male genitor, but may be mother's brother or some other category of kin. But for simplicity we will refer to "father" throughout this study. 6. We are refraining from offering any simplistic definition of consciousness. To define the term would imply we understand precisely what consciousness is. Rather, the question of consciousness is problematic: what consciousness is, how it functions, its relationship to physiology, how it develops, are all questions of primary concern. 7. The term "sensorium" is a common one in medicine and psychiatry meaning "any sensory nerve center; more frequently the whole sensory apparatus of the body" (Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary, 23rd edition). 8. Towards the end of his career, Merleau-Ponty had concluded that even the organization of perception could be influenced by culture (Merleau-Ponty 1968:212; see also Bide 1983:109ff), thus bringing his thinking in line with a major theme in anthropological theory, the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (see Miller and McNeil 1969 for a review). 9. To put it in Greek terms, the organization of physis is both epistemologically and ontologically prior to that of logos. 10. Our use of prajna and vinnana agrees more with Suzuki (1967:66) than with Turner (1974:47ff) in that prajna reflects the order-as-given in the perceived lifeworld and not the fundamentals of social organization, although the latter may be presented to consciousness in the former. 11. We are ignoring for the sake of simplicity any process of individuation leading to a more androgynous personality. 12. Tom Verny (personal communication) has also considered the connection between birth trauma and sexual violence on the part of males. He has initiated research along these lines. REFERENCES d'Aquili, E.G. (1982) Senses of Reality in Science and Religion: A Neuroepistemological Perspective. *Zygon* 17(4):361-384. d'Aquili, E.G., Laughlin, CD., McManus, J. (1979) The

Spectrum of Ritual. New York: Columbia University Press. Barlow, H.B., Mollon, J.D., editors (1982) *The Senses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. de Beauvoir, S. (1982). *The Second Sex*. London, Penguin.

Beyer, S. (1973) *The Cult of Tara*. Berkeley, California, University of California Press. Blakemore, C. (1974) *Developmental Factors in the Formation of Feature Extracting Neurons*. In *The Neurosciences Third Study Program* (ed. by F.O. Schmitt and F.G. Worden). Cambridge, MIT Press. Bohm, D. (1980) *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul. Borges, J.L. (1961) *Antologia Personal* Buenos Aires, Sur.

Brazelton, T.B., Als, H. (1979) *Four Early Stages in the Development of Mother-Infant Interaction*. *The Psychosomatic Study of the Child* 34:349-369. Brazelton, T.B., Koslowski, B., Tronick, E. (1977) *Neonatal Behavior Among Urban Zambians and Americans*. *Annual Progress in Child Psychiatry and Child Development* (ed. by S. Chess and A. Thomas). New York, Brunner/Mazel Publishers. Buddhaghosa, B. (1976) *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*. Vol. 1. Berkeley, Shambhala. Campbell, J. (1949) *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. New York, The World Publishing Co. Chamberlain, D.B. (1980) *Reliability of Birth Memories: Evidence From Mother and Child Pairs in Hypnosis*. Paper presented at 23rd annual meeting of American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, Minneapolis. Chamberlain, D.B. (1982) *Symposium Commentary on Lloyd de Mause's Fetal Origins of History*. *Journal of Psychohistory* 10(2):222-229. Chamberlain, D.B. (1983) *Consciousness at Birth*. Chamberlain Communication, 5164 35th Street, San Diego, California 92116. Cheek, D.B. (1974) *Sequential Head and Shoulder Movements Appearing With Age Regression In Hypnosis To Birth*. *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 16(4):261-266. Count, E.W. (1973) *Being and Becoming Human*, New York, Van Nostrand Reinhold. Crook, J.H. (1980) *The Evolution of Human Consciousness*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. David-Neel, A. (1958) *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*. New York, University Books. De Mause, L. (1981). *The Fetal Origins of History*. *The Journal of Psychohistory* 9(1):1-89. Dowman, K. (1975). *The Nyingma Icons: A Collection of Line Drawings, Kailash (Kathmandu, Nepal)* 3(4):320-416. Eliade, M. (1958) *Birth and Rebirth*, New York. Eliade, M. (1964) *Shamanism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press. Evans-Wintz, W.Y. (1960) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* New York, Galaxy. Evans-Wintz, W.Y. (1969) *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*. London, Oxford University Press. Fries, M.E. (1977). *Longitudinal Study: Prenatal Period to Parenthood*, *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 25:115-140. Gellhorn, E. (1967). *Principles of Autonomic-Somatic Integration*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. Getly, A. (1962) *The Gods of Northern Buddhism* Rutland, Vt., Charles Tuttle. Gibson, E.J. (1969). *Principles of Perceptual Learning and Development*, New York, Appleton-Century-Crofts. Globus, G. et al. (1976) *Consciousness and the Brain*. New York, Plenum.

Greenley, A.M. (1975). *The Sociology of the Paranormal Beverly Hills*, Sage Publications. Groff, S. (1979) *LSD Psychotherapy*. Pomona, California, Hunter House. Gruber, H.E., Voneche, J.J. (1977). *The Essential Piaget* New York, Basic Books. Harner, M. (1980) *The Way of the Shaman*. New York, Bantam Books. Haug, H. (1972) *Stereological Methods in the Analysis of Neuronal Parameters in the Central Nervous System*. *Journal of Microscopy* 95(1):165-180. Hertz, R. (1909) *Death and the Right Hand* (the 1960 edition). Aberdeen, Cohen and West. Hofer, M.A. (1974) *The Role of Early Experience in the Development of Autonomic Regulation*. In *Limbic and Autonomic Nervous Systems Research* (ed. by L.V. diCara). New York, Plenum. Hufford, D.J. (1982). *The Terror That Comes in the Night*. Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press. Ihde, D. (1983) *Existential Technics*. Albany, New York, State University of New York Press. James, W. (1962) *The Principles of Psychology*. New York, Dover. Janov, A. (1972) *The Primal Revolution*, New York, Simon and Schuster. Jung, C.G. (1955) *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul. Kessen, W., Heath, M.M., Salapatek, P. (1970) *Human Infancy: A Bibliography and Guide*. In *Carmichael's Manual of Child Psychology* (ed. by P. Mussen). New York, Wiley. Kirk, V. (1983) *Neuropsychology of Language, Reading, and Spelling*. New York, Academic Press. Klopff, A.H. (1982) *The Hedonistic Neuron: A Theory of Memory, Learning and Intelligence* New York: Hemisphere Publishing Co. Laing, R.D. (1982) *The Voice of Experience*. London, Allen Lane. Langworthy, V.R. (1933) *Development of Behavior Patterns and Myelinization of the Nervous System in the Human Fetus and Infant*. *Contributions to Embryology*. Washington D.C.: Carnegie Institute. Vol. 24. No. 139.

Laughlin C.D., d'Aquili, E.G. (1974) *Biogenetic Structuralism*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Laughlin C.D., McManus, J., Shearer, J. (1984) *Dreams, Trance and Visions: What a Transpersonal Anthropology Might Look Like*. *Phoenix* 7:141-159.

Laughlin, C.D., McManus, J., Stephens, CD. (1981) "A Model of Brain and Symbol," *Semiotica* 33(3/4):211-236.

Laughlin, C.D., McManus, J., Webber, M. (1984) *Neurognosis, Individuation and Tibetan Arising Yoga Practice*. *Phoenix: Journal of Transpersonal Anthropology* (in press).

Laughlin, C.D., Stephens, C.D. (1980) *Symbolism, Canalization, and P-Structure*, in *Symbol As Sense* (ed. by M.L. Foster and S. Brandis). New York, Academic Press.

Laughlin, C.D., McManus, J., Rubinstein, R.A., Shearer, J. (1985) *The Ritual Control of Experience*. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 7(in press).

Levi-Strauss, C. (1968) *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston, Beacon.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1978) *Myth and Meaning*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Liedloff, J. (1975) *The Continuum Concept*. London, Future Publications.

Liley, A.W., (1972). *The Fetus As a Personality*. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 6:99-105.

MacCormack, C. P., Strathern, M. (1980) *Nature, Culture and Gender*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962) *Phenomenology of Perception*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964). *The Primacy of Perception*. Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press.

Miller, G.A., McNeill, D. (1969) *Psycholinguistics*, in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 3 (ed. by G. Lindzey and E. Aronson). Reading, Mass., Addison-Wesley.

Narada Maha Thera (1975) *A Manual of Abhidharma*, Kandy, Sri Lanka, Buddhist Publication Society.

Needham R. (1973) *Right and Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Neumann, E. (1963) *The Great Mother*. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Nishitani, K. (1982) *Religion and Nothingness*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Ortner, S.B. (1974) *Is Female To Male as Nature Is To Culture?* In *Woman, Culture and Society* (ed. by M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere). Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Paul, R.A. (1982) *The Tibetan Symbolic World* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Piaget, J. (1971) *Biology and Knowledge*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Piaget, J. (1977) *The Development of Thought* New York, The Viking Press.

Piaget, J. (1980) *Adaptation and Intelligence* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Ploye, P.M. (1973) *Does Prenatal Mental Life Exist?* *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 54:241-246.

Powers, W.T. (1973) *Behavior: Control of Perception*. Chicago, Aldine.

Pribram, K.H. (1971) *Languages of the Brain*. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall.

Pribram, K.H. (1977) *Observations on the Organization of Studies of Mind, Brain, and Behavior*. In *Alternate States of Consciousness* (ed. by N. Zinbert). New York, The Free Press.

Raikov, V.L. (1980). *Age Regression To Infancy By Adult Subjects In Deep Hypnosis*. *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 22(3):156-163.

Raikov, V.L. (1982) *Hypnotic Age Regression to the Neonatal Period: Comparisons With Role Playing*. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 30(2):108-116.

Richmond, J.B., Lustman, S.L. (1955) *Autonomic Function in the Neonate: I. Implications for Psychosomatic Theory*. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 17:269ff.

Rubinstein, R.A. (1983). *Structuralism and The Study of Cognitive Process*. In *The Future of Structuralism* (ed. by J. Costen and A. deRuijter). Gottingen-Geismar, West Germany, Edition Herodot.

Rubinstein, R.A., Laughlin, CD. (1977) *Bridging Levels of Systemic Organization*. *Current Anthropology* 18:459-481.

Schell, L.M. (1981) *Environmental Noise and Human Prenatal Growth*. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 56:63-70.

Selye, H. (1956) *The Stress of Life*. New York, McGraw-Hill.

Sherif, M. (1977) *Crisis in Social Psychology: Some Remarks Towards Breaking Through the Crisis*. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 3:368-382.

Silber, H. (1971) *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts*. New York, Dover (orig. ed. 1917).

Snellgrove, D., Richardson, H.E. (1968) *A Cultural History of Tibet* New York, Frederick Praeger.

Sontag, L.W. (1941) *The Significance of Fetal Environmental Differences*. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 42:996-1003.

Stave, U. (1978) *Maturation, Adaptation, and Tolerance*. In *Perinatal Physiology* (ed. by U. Stave). New York, Plenum Medical Book Co.

Stein, R.A. (1972) *Tibetan Civilization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Stone, L.J. et al (1973) *The Competent Infant* New York, Basic Books.

Sugarman, M. (1977) *Perinatal Influences on Maternal-Infant Attachment*. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 48:407-421.

Suyuki, D.T. (1967) *An Interpretation of Zen*

Experience. In *The Japanese Mind* (ed. by C.A. Moore). Honolulu, East-West Center Press. Thompson, A.H. (1935) *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Tillich, P. (1963) *Systematic Theology*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. Trungpa, C. (1981) *Journey Without Goal* Boulder, Colorado, Prajna Press. Turkewitz, G., Kenny, P.A. (1982) *Limitations on Input as a Basis for Neural Organization and Perceptual Development: A Preliminary Theoretical Statement*. *Developmental Psychobiology* 15(4):357-368. Turner, V. (1974) *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press. Verny, T. (1982) *the Secret Life of the Unborn Child* New York, Dell. Vycinas, V. (1961) *Earth and Gods*. The Hague, Nijhoff. Webber, M., and Laughlin, CD. (1979) *The Mechanism of Symbolic Penetration*. Department of Sociology-Anthropology Working Paper 79-8, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. Webber, M., Stephens, C.D., Laughlin, C.D. (1983) *Masks: A Re-Examination*, In *The Power of Symbols* (ed. by R. Crumrine and M. Halpin) Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press. Wenger, M.A. (1941) *The Measurement of Individual Differences in Autonomic Balance*. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 3:427. Willis, J.D. (1972) *The Diamond Light* New York, Simon and Schuster. AuthorAffiliation Charles D. Laughlin, Ph.D. AuthorAffiliation Dr. Charles Laughlin is a professor of anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1S 5B6. He is co-author of the recently published book, *Brain, Symbol and Experience* (Boston: Shambhala New Science Library, 1990).

Publication title: Pre- and Peri-natal Psychology Journal

Volume: 5

Issue: 2

Pages: 147-165

Number of pages: 19

Publication year: 1990

Publication date: Winter 1990

Year: 1990

Publisher: Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health

Place of publication: New York

Country of publication: United States

Journal subject: Medical Sciences--Obstetrics And Gynecology, Psychology, Birth Control

ISSN: 08833095

Source type: Scholarly Journals

Language of publication: English

Document type: General Information

ProQuest document ID: 198688036

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/198688036?accountid=36557>

Copyright: Copyright Association for Pre&Perinatal Psychology and Health Winter 1990

Last updated: 2010-06-06

Database: ProQuest Public Health

Contact ProQuest

Copyright © 2012 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved. - **Terms and Conditions**