

Parallel Thinking Part 30: The Enigma of Consciousness II

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End United Synagogue



In our previous article, we introduced the idea of inner consciousness as the inner knowledge of one's own existence. While consciousness is assumed to exist in some animals to varying degrees, some have

investigated whether human consciousness is different and whether there are Jewish sources to support this idea.

Studies in animals have demonstrated varying levels of self-awareness. They seem to have a level of conscious experience and an understanding that other animals have mental states which are different from their own. While it is impossible to know if animals contemplate their own existence, the Torah indicates that mankind certainly has a different type of self-awareness.

While animals have a spiritual essence called a *nefesh* (see Bereishit 1:20-26), mankind was “made in God’s image” (ibid. 1:27) and with a higher spiritual essence, called a *neshamah* (ibid. 2:7). This *neshamah* is what elevates mankind above the animals and allows us to contemplate and yearn for God. In their book *Beyond Your Ego*, Jewish psychologists Dr. Judith Mishell and Dr. Shalom Srebreinik associate self-awareness with this *neshamah*.

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the Torah indicates that they changed the nature of what it is to be human. Immediately following the sin, the verse states: “And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves garments” (ibid. 3:7).

Rashi (d. 1105) notes that this does not mean that Adam and Eve had thought they were clothed and suddenly saw that they were in fact naked, but rather refers to a new level of awareness. Rabbi Yehudah Loew (known as the Maharal, d. 1609) explains that until this point, Adam and

Eve only understood things which were good, such as the comprehension of God and the reality they existed in. Following the sin however, they perceived evil.

Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno (d. 1550) adds that they now turned their attention to things that were pleasurable, even though potentially damaging. This is why, unlike the animals, they recognised their nakedness and covered themselves out of shame. Before the sin, the purpose of reproduction was innocently viewed only in the context of procreation, which was a commandment from God. Now it was also desired for the personal gratification it offered.

Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Schwadron (d. 1911) explains that mankind must contemplate the greatness of God in contrast to the lowliness of man. Before their sin, Adam and Eve looked only towards God, because they possessed the same spiritual purity. Their sin damaged the very nature of their being, invading their minds with self-serving thoughts of physical gratification. They were therefore able to contemplate their own downfall – their nakedness, and attempted to hide it with fig leaves.

This translates into our own inner struggle between the self-awareness of who we really are, versus the supreme spiritual potential we possess – the refined people we could become. Mankind’s inner consciousness is therefore dominated by this struggle: how much of our lives will we use to strive for greatness, and how much will we use to pursue more animalistic desires?

