AWARENESS AS THE FUNDAMENTAL GROUND OF REALITY:
A SPECULATIVE INQUIRY

Good afternoon.

First Slide

I'll start by clarifying that I am neither a physicist nor a philosopher, but a physician psychiatrist, quite taken by an attempt at understanding the nature of consciousness.

Throughout a practice of more than 50 years as a psychotherapist, it has become clear that consciousness and awareness, which we usually use almost interchangeably, are indeed distinct entities.

Working with patients in the course of a psychodynamic interpretation, a shift in the focus of awareness, leads to a shift in consciousness, which remains fixed until a new focus of awareness comes about.

As an example, a very brief clinical vignette: a rebellious youth's consciousness of a distant, unfair father, is modified to a different consciousness, that of understanding father's unique love expression, and to an ending of the rebellion, when the youth is made aware of the father's own childhood abuse and suffering.

Contributions, to name a few, from Advaita Vedanta, Buddhist thought, Hüsserl's "transcendental reduction", Zahavi's "pre-reflective self-awareness" , as well as insights obtained through personal meditative practices, have all contributed to the following perspective.

There are, of course, very many authors and traditions, philosophical and religious, that also address this topic in various ways; unfortunately this short 15-minute talk does not give us time to examine them.

Second slide

While consciousness is awareness of something, therefore tied to that object, awareness is free of any object, existing in a present now.
It is **luminous,** as a **presence** that does not become its own object.

(By the way, what Vedanta calls "Chit", I am calling awareness)

Consciousness, on the other hand, is tied to temporality, therefore dissolving when its object ceases to be. The one is free, as a totality that lacks nothing; whereas the other is bound and dependent.

Consciousness requires a subject that is aware of something, that subject could be a cell membrane conscious of surrounding chemicals, or a deer

in the forest, conscious of a cold misty evening, or of myself, aware, and therefore conscious, of you all.

What follows is deliberately speculative. I am not presenting an established scientific theory, but a conceptual hypothesis.

The central claim is that **awareness is fundamental, while consciousness is awareness of something**. That distinction sounds simple, yet its consequences may not be.

In consciousness, its objects could be a sensation, a perception, a thought, image, memory, emotion or even a self. Therefore it contains a relationship: something is aware of something. Once that relation is established, there is distinction: subject and object, this and that, before and after.

Suppose that we remove the object, what remains?

I propose that what remains is awareness itself, or pure awareness: not awareness of anything, but a **primitive, luminous presence.**

It is that **presence** that makes consciousness possible.

In other words, consciousness presupposes awareness while awareness does not presuppose consciousness.

This gives awareness an **ontological priority** over consciousness, but as we shall see, not necessarily a temporal priority

Everything that becomes an object of consciousness occurs in time: a sound begins and ends, a thought appears and disappears, sensations change, memory refers to the past, anticipation to the future.

They are all temporal, whereas awareness itself seems different; there is no such thing as yesterday's awareness or tomorrow's awareness; it is always in the present, as an ongoing **now.**

This suggests that the essential character or quality of awareness is that of an **atemporal, intrinsic, luminous presence.**

Third slide

If awareness is atemporal, yet present at every temporal instant, then, from within time, it would appear as an unchangeable presence, an invariant **now.**

We must be careful though, not to think of awareness as an eternal observer, for an observer implies something observed, which then recreates the subject-object distinction belonging to consciousness.

Awareness does not observe anything, but it is rather the **luminous presence** within which, observation, as consciousness, becomes possible.

It does **not** move from one moment to another; if it is truly an atemporal presence, it does not make sense to say that it persists through time, persistence itself, is temporal. Awareness simply **is.**

We would then say, that **awareness does not move through time, but rather, that time moves through awareness.**

In this context, awareness would **not** be aware of itself, for then it would become its own object with two conceptual poles: the awareness that is aware, and the awareness of which it is aware. We would have then reflexivity, thus crossed into consciousness.

This leads us then to consider three levels:

Fourth slide

Awareness, an objectless atemporal luminous intrinsic presence.

Consciousness, awareness illuminating something, an object.

Self consciousness, as consciousness taking itself as an object: “I am conscious that I am aware”, and viceversa: “I am aware that I am conscious”

Objectless awareness, though manifest in everything, can only be **known** by a self conscious entity, as far as we know, us humans.

There is no self within primordial awareness, no hidden observer watching reality; that comes with consciousness. Neither does awareness need to know that it exists.

Does awareness become consciousness?

This is a tough nut to crack, for if awareness is invariant and atemporal, how could distinction possibly ever arise from within it ? Arising implies, that from an absence, something is subsequently present, which is a temporal description. This formulation then, would have to be rejected.

Nothing happens to awareness; it remains by definition invariant.

So maybe we could say that **awareness is an atemporal ground, while consciousness is differentiated, temporal manifestation**.

Fifth slide

The relation therefore is not before and after, but rather ground and manifestation. Meaning that when we say that awareness is “prior” to consciousness, we are saying that it is **ontologically prior**, not temporally prior.

If so, then there was never a time in which awareness existed, and potential manifestation did not.

This brings us to the possibility that both share eternity, but of a different type: on one hand awareness is eternal because it is atemporal; it has not existed “forever”, in that forever implies an indefinitely extended duration; it has no duration, it simply is.

On the other hand, consciousness, as differentiated manifestation, could be eternal in another sense, in that there may never have been a time without differentiation.

This would make consciousness a temporal eternity, a reality without a first transition from pure awareness; and as such, it has been there forever.

In this frame, timeless awareness and temporal manifestation, would represent two inseparable aspects of reality, neither preceding the other in time.

(Pause)

We still have an unresolved question: why would an invariant, atemporal ground have a differentiated, temporal manifestation at all?
I have no answer to that.

Yet, a metaphorical speculative possibility would be, that conceptually speaking, when something exists, it evokes its opposite; as in light evoking darkness or emptiness evoking something-ness. For the concept of cold, we contrast it with thet of hot and so forth.

In this sense then, we could say that fundamental atemporal awareness, again, metaphorically, stands in opposition to temporal manifestation, not that it “needs” it in order to be, but rather that **manifestation is the**

potentiality inherent in awareness, and that it is this inherent potential "tension" that creates differentiation.

Essentially it is the tension between time and timelessness; between structured manifestation and invariant presence; ultimately, between being and non-being.

How does physical reality enter this picture?

It seems to be that the higher the complexity of matter, the higher are its levels of consciousness. A mosquito higher than an amoeba, a lizard higher, higher still a dog and an ape, with us humans at the highest level of complexity, therefore of greater "consciousness density" (our brains being the most complex matter known in the universe, unless of course we discover some Andrómedans, who'll see us mere frogs…).

The human brain's complexity is of such an extent, that likely, some critical threshold is reached which results in a phase-transition from general consciousness to self-consciousness.

Would it be possible then, that what physics describes as differentiated physical reality, and what philosophy and psychology encounter as differentiated conscious experience, actually belong to a deeper common

structure?

Here we would have to ask: is there a relationship between awareness, its potential for differentiation, and the manifestation of the quantum vacuum at the core of reality?

(Incidentally, the abstract for this presentation suggests that awareness and the quantum vacuum share in identity. That is not correct; the former might be generative of the latter, but they are not the same).

This brings us to the **hard problem.** The question has been: Can matter produce consciousness? If so, how? This carries the implication that matter is fundamental, and somehow, consciousness emerges from it.

But if awareness is fundamental, the question changes, so then it is not the case that non-conscious matter manufactures awareness or that somehow awareness becomes consciousness, but rather **this** question:

What is the relationship, between atemporal awareness and temporal, differentiated, conscious experience?

This does not solve the hard problem, but it does reframe it.

Sixth slide

Final considerations

I am not claiming to have **demonstrated,** that awareness is fundamental, or that neuroscience is unnecessary, for it is clearly crucial to the structure and contents of human consciousness.

Nor am I proposing a conventional substance dualism, with a mental substance interacting with physical matter, but rather suggesting that awareness **might not be another thing in our four dimensional universe at all**, but an **ontological, necessary, fundamental and luminous condition,** within which the distinctions that characterize conscious and physical reality, become possible

Conclusion

Returning to the question I began with : What if awareness and consciousness are not the same thing?

Assuming that distinction, several consequences follow:

1.- Awareness may be ontologically prior to consciousness, without being

temporarlly prior.

2.- Its essential character would be that of an **atemporal, intrinsic, luminous presence**.

3.- It is not an observer, but that within which, observation becomes possible.

4.- It can not be aware of itself, otherwise it invites reflexivity and becomes consciousness.

5.- Nothing happens to awareness, it remains invariant.

6.- We might be dealing with **two inseparable** aspects of reality: atemporal awareness and temporal manifestation or said differently: timeless presence and differentiated experience.

The fundamental question then, is not: how does matter become aware?, or, how does awareness become consciousness?, but rather, again, **what is the relationship between timeless awareness, and the temporal world of conscious experience?**

Perhaps, the two have never been temporally separated at all, therefore, though being different, in their shared eternity, they are one.

Thank you.