Preface

Even when we were still limited, for information, to newspapers, TV, and radio, and when science still had not progressed beyond the polio vaccine and atomic bombs, we were often told how "sophisticated" we were compared with all previous generations. And thanks to good nutrition and large doses of sex in advertising, we often heard how quickly, compared with earlier generations, our children "matured." Today, of course—witness such developments as the Web, the Genome Project, and missile defense—we have advanced further still. But could it be that these mantras about our sophistication and maturity—about our unparalleled awareness of "what is" and of "how things are"—are something less than unexamined assumptions? Could they be pure nonsense?

The following work takes up this question in relation to our most immediate and intimate sensings of "who we are" and "where we are," and of who or what we should aspire to become. It attempts a description of the way in which such sensings manifest in "modern consciousness," as well as an analysis of some ways in which these sensings were verbalized, in the past, in the major philosophical and religious traditions of both East and West. While doing so, it dwells at considerable length on the way in which awareness in us is molded by language, for we naturally and habitually accept language, that is, "verbal signs," as the primary *mediator*, to us, of "who" and "where" we are. Hence the title's implied, and tentative, definition of humankind as the "word-animal," the animal of the *logos*.

In what follows I will frequently argue, contrary to those mantras, that in many matters involving these basic sensings and perceptions traditional consciousness was much more aware—much keener and more observant, much more *alert* to "where we are" and "who we are"—than modern consciousness. This does not mean, however, that in making my argument I adopt any traditional premises or claims—for example, the "existence of God," the "sole reality of *brahman*," or "emptiness," as my own. Nor does it mean that I embrace as gospel any particular way in which any particular tradition has *verbalized* its awareness, for all such verbalizings, including my own, are historical and therefore transient. What it does mean is that when I read Meister Eckhart, or when I reflect, for example, on the teachings of India's Samkhya, it seems to me that I have entered into a sounding of reality—of *This*—which penetrates almost *immeasurably* more deeply than anything I find in the writings, say, of Freud, Einstein, or Heidegger. In my own case, it means that those old or even "ancient" texts have helped, more than anything else, to bring to the surface, and to invigorate, my own obscure, innermost "sensings" and "intuitions." And it means, as far as some chapters of the present work are concerned, that I explore certain traditional teachings in considerable detail, and argue for their superior "alertness," but that overall I have attempted to verbalize those shared sensings and intuitions out of my own thought and experience. To that end I have introduced a number of original concepts, terms, and metaphors, and have attempted to formulate them throughout using the words and phrases which are my own, those of this "historical moment."

Though the term itself appears in it but rarely, the work's central question, as indicated in the subtitle, is that of the possibility of "the mystical." I do not use the word to mean something arcane, shadowy, or magical which may or may not exist somewhere "way out there" in a kind of spiritual or metaphysical outer space. Instead my usage of the term is circumscribed, first, to the

realm of things which have the aura of "the sacred," or of "divinity" or "the numinous"—something preternaturally alive, extraordinary, powerful, quickening, and astonishing; concentrated in a particular name, it can be suggestive of a "person," as is the case with 'God' and 'Allah', or of a more impersonal, but equally real, presence, as with '*brahman*', or of that profound "neither something nor nothing" which Buddhists call *shunyata*, "emptiness." And then more narrowly and precisely, and as the very opposite of that "something shadowy" just mentioned: by "mystical" I mean the utterly intimate and *immediate* "experiencing" or "knowing" of that dense and compelling presence, even the immediate experience of vanishing into or simply *being* it. I mean, in other words, the *most* immediate of all possible conscious experiences. Since images, words, and concepts are signs or symbols—are *mediators* of something "mediated"—"the mystical" will tend to be associated with their absence; and so for example, and as the traditions, as we shall see, sometimes put it: to approach God, the soul must first empty itself of all images, words, and concepts; or in the *Upanishad*s' words, *brahman* is "where neither eye nor word nor mind goes," or "that unattained from which words and the mind turn back," (*Upanishatsamgrahah*, 2, 26, my translation). So it is that an attempted exploration of the mystical easily becomes a journey of the "word-animal" into "signlessness."

The first three chapters, which explore our various perceptions and valuations of alternative modes of being and of being conscious, are framed as a description and analysis of what I call the "Other Paradox"—it is "other" in relation to the "Platonic Paradox," which asserts that mind's "lower" sensibilities can be elevated and purified into the godlike aspirations of philosophy. While the Platonic Paradox asserts that the lower can *become* the higher, the Other Paradox points to a paradoxical similarity, if not *identity*, in some primary ways in which human beings may perceive or define the *best* possible ways to be and to be conscious, and the worst. To mention, for now, two brief examples: a famous twentieth century novel by the Austrian Robert Musil bears the title *The Man Without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*)—as the negative connation of the title suggests, Musil focuses on the absence of defined individuality, or of clear, determinate "identity," in the novel's anti-heroic central character. In Indian thought, on the other hand, one of the most frequent and characteristic Sanskrit terms used to describe or evoke the *greatness* of highest being, and especially of *brahman*, is *nirguna*, the precise meaning of which is "without qualities." Second: Camus writes that the human heart's "wild longing for clarity, its need for "reducing (reality) to terms of thought," must finally confront, in anguish, the world's lack of rationality—this confrontation between the passionate need to know and unknowable reality constitutes the tragedy and absurdity of the human condition (Camus, 16). For Dionysius, on the other hand, the highest, most joyful, and even most "knowing" condition we can possibly achieve is that supreme experience in which, after "renouncing all that the mind may conceive," one is "supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge" (Dionysius, 137). My attempt to explicate and document this "Other Paradox" forms the focal point of the first two chapters; and on the basis of that analysis I offer an account of human consciousness as the "dance of instinct and intuition in chapter three.

Those first three chapters attempt a kind of topography of primary human ways to be and to know, one which includes a description of "normal life" and "normal consciousness." Working within the framework created in those chapters, the next four proceed to explore how human consciousness, as I have described it, contains within itself the possibility of a particular transformation or *process*. That process involves a turning away from "normal" perceptions and ideals of being and of being conscious, the emergence of new perceptions, and the initiation of movement towards entirely different modes of being and knowing. This movement completes itself

in chapter seven with awareness' entry into the "signless element." The eighth and final chapter proceeds to consider whether and how language might be used to relate to that "wordless" realm which the "word-animal" has now entered.

Some readers of the text have suggested that I accompany it with the chapter-by-chapter summary which I had prepared. I have therefore inserted it immediately following this Preface, and readers may consult it as they see fit. Since some of the historical individuals or schools of thought I mention or quote may be unfamiliar to some readers, I include at the end a brief sketch of those I take to be lesser known. There is considerable reference to foreign, especially Sanskrit, terms, and I have attempted to explain them as fully as needed when I introduce them. In order to avoid possible complications in readers' use of the text, I have entered those terms in anglicized form, omitting all diacritics. Abbreviations used in citations are also explained at the end, immediately following the list of works cited.

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