

Phenomenology Lab 9

Consciousness: The WebCourse.

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Marcel Proust's hypothesis about consciousness and self.

Marcel Proust was one of the great stream-of-consciousness novelists at the turn of the 20th century. In the famous quotation below, he arrives at an important hypothesis by thinking about his own mental processes upon waking very early in the morning. (See underlined paragraph below).

Question --- does Proust's experience make sense to you? Do you have any similar experiences?

You are welcome to explore your personal phenomenology, and share whatever you like to, with the rest of us.

Question --- how would you state his hypothesis? How would we decide if it were true or false?

From Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* (Remembrances of Times Past, Vol. I).

Don't forget that this is about 100 years ago; different times, difference place, but very much the human condition we know today. So don't worry about the idiosyncracies of time and place. Just focus on the shared experiences.

“For a long time I used to go to bed early. Sometimes, when I had put out my candle, my eyes would close so quickly that I had not even time to say "I'm going to sleep." And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V. This impression would persist for some moments after I was awake; it did not disturb my mind, but it lay like scales upon my eyes and prevented them from registering the fact that the candle was no longer burning. Then it would begin to seem unintelligible, as the thoughts of a former existence must be to a reincarnate spirit; the subject of my book would separate itself from me, leaving me free to choose whether I would form part of it or no; and at the same time my sight would return and I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and restful enough for the eyes, and even more, perhaps, for my mind, to which it appeared incomprehensible, without a cause, a matter dark indeed.

“... then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke at midnight, not knowing where I was, I could not be sure at first who I was; ... but then the memory ... would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being... (and) ... would put together by degrees the component parts of my ego.”