

Consciousness and Experience

John Rowan

On Saturday 24th May 1997 there took place the inaugural meeting of the Consciousness and Experiential Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society. This was yet another new departure for the BPS, already reeling from its daring in creating a Section for Transpersonal Psychology. The Section avows its commitment to the subjective, saying that our subjective experience is not something to be omitted from psychology in favour of objectivity. This implies, they say, that the standard forms of research methodology will have to be re-examined and alternatives such as phenomenology and hermeneutics entertained and evaluated. The student studying psychology should have a new curriculum which includes the 'cognitive unconscious', imagery, emotion and so forth. New discoveries in brain science about dissociation and modular organisation will need to be integrated with the study of conscious experience. 'Can experiences alter the behaviour of neurons?' they ask.

They even dare to ask: 'Can Buddhism add something to our understanding of how human beings work and develop?' They ask for relevance and interest, and consider that these should not be fobbed off in the interest of more disinterestedness, more objectivity, more experimental rigour. Students are interested in the

transformative potential of psychology, and this should not be shrugged aside.

The meeting, which was attended by about twenty people and held at the Open University in Milton Keynes, started off with four brief talks: a brief history of psychological writings about consciousness by David Marks of Middlesex University; an outline of what we might mean by experiential psychology by Richard Stevens (past chair of the AHP in Britain); an account of change and well-being by Jane Henry, who teaches at the Open University and was one of the prime movers in setting up the Section; and a talk on multi-cultural perspectives by John Pickering of Warwick University. These were well received and made a useful opening, clarifying as they did the basic orientation of the Section.

In the afternoon we talked about what the Section might do, and held the first elections. One of the main things which is going to happen is the conference, details of which are given on the previous page.

It seems clear that there is a great deal of common ground between this Section and humanistic psychology, and members of the AHP could be interested in all the discussions which are involved. This seems a positive event which should be welcomed and valued.

